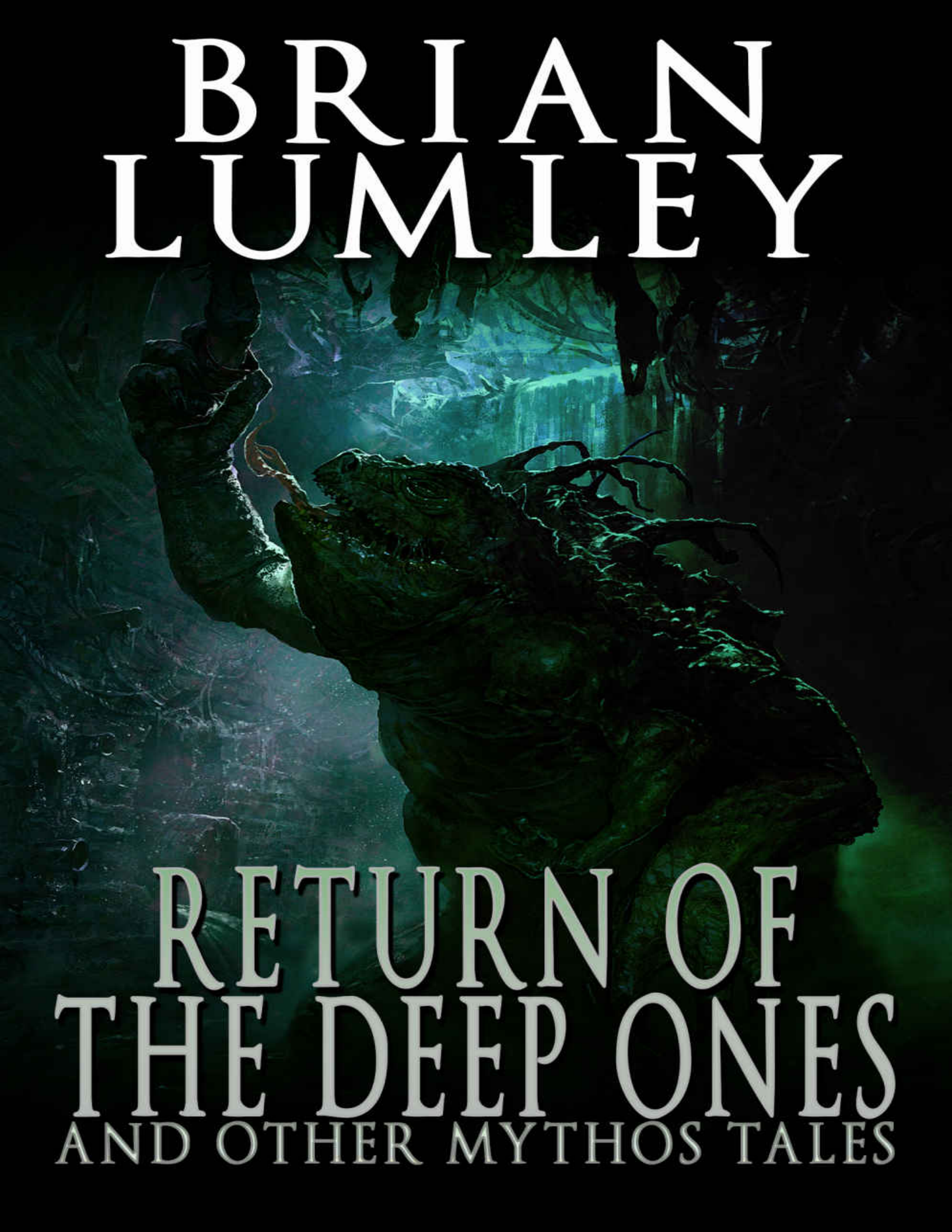
BRIAN LUMLEY



RETURN OF THE DEEP ONES

AND OTHER MYTHOS TALES

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By Brian Lumley

A Macabre Ink Production
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Digital Edition published by Crossroad Press
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Copy-Edited By: Kurt M. Criscione

Original publication by ROC—1994

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Meet the Author

Born in County Durham, he joined the British Army's Royal Military Police and wrote stories in his spare time before retiring with the rank of Warrant Officer Class 1 in 1980 and becoming a professional writer.

In the 1970s he added to H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos cycle of stories, including several tales and a novel featuring the character Titus Crow. Several of his early books were published by Arkham House. Other stories pastiched Lovecraft's Dream Cycle but featured Lumley's original characters David Hero and Eldin the Wanderer. Lumley once explained the difference between his Cthulhu Mythos characters and Lovecraft's: "My guys fight back. Also, they like to have a laugh along the way."

Later works included the Necroscope series of novels, which produced spin-off series such as the Vampire World Trilogy, The Lost Years parts 1 and 2, and the E-Branch trilogy. The central protagonist of the earlier Necroscope novels appears in the anthology Harry Keogh and Other Weird Heroes. The latest entry in the Necroscope saga is The Mobius Murders.

Lumley served as president of the Horror Writers Association from 1996 to 1997. In March 2010, Lumley was awarded Lifetime Achievement Award of the Horror Writers Association. He also received a World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2010.

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RETURN OF THE DEEP ONES AND OTHER MYTHOS TALES

Table of Contents

FOREWORD

INCEPTION

LORD OF THE WORMS

BENEATH THE MOORS

THE RETURN OF THE DEEP ONES

FOREWORD

About *Return of the Deep Ones and Other Mythos Tales.*

When I decided to put together this second collection for ROC, I found myself with a good many stories to choose from but no general theme—except horror, of course! But the theme was not long in coming. Since I have always had something of a penchant for the Cthulhu Mythos of the late great H. P. Lovecraft, and since a good many of my longer stories or short novels are set against a Mythos backdrop, it seemed to me that this was the ideal opportunity to collect a few of these together.

What's more the title story, *The Return of the Deep Ones,* had only ever appeared as a three-part serial, and this was my chance to see it published as a complete novel. As for *Beneath the Moors*: that short novel was long out of print in its original black-bound Arkham House edition, and had never seen print as a paperback.

The long Titus Crow novella, *Lord of the Worms,* had only ever appeared in a limited edition of Crow's collected adventures, and would be mainly new to the greater paperback audience. As for the short story *Inception,* in which Titus Crow makes his initial (however brief) appearance: that, too, was a rare one, having been printed only once, also in a limited edition. And it was necessary to include the latter, if only as an introduction to *Lord of the Worms.*

So the book was born.

The stories in *Return of the Deep Ones and Other Mythos Tales* were penned across a span of fifteen years; *Beneath the Moors* was completed in 1970, and *Inception* in 1985. Oddly enough, this first Titus Crow story, *Inception,* was written last! That came about when Paul Ganley, the American publisher of a good many of my tales, asked me how Crow first got started: what was his origin? This story was the result.

The rest of them result from what might be described as a lifelong fascination with the macabre … and a warped imagination! I must assume that my reader is similarly afflicted, if not now, then hopefully by the time he turns the last page …

Brian Lumley
Torquay, Devon
February 1992

INCEPTION

December 1916. One week before Christmas.

London, in the vicinity of Wapping, an hour before dawn …

Mist-shrouded facades of warehouses formed square, stony faces, bleakly foreboding with their blind eyes of boarded windows; Dickensian still, the cobbled riverside streets rang to the frantic clatter of madly racing footsteps. Except for the figure of a man, flying, his coat flapping like broken wings, nothing stirred. Just him … and his pursuer: a second male figure, tall, utterly silent, flowing like a fog-spawned wraith not one hundred yards behind.

As to who these two were: their names do not matter. Suffice to say that they were of completely opposite poles, and that the one who feared and ran so noisily was a good man and entirely human, because of which he'd been foolish …

And so he fled, that merely human being, clamorously, with pounding heart, tearing the mist like cobwebs in a tunnel and leaving a yawning hole behind; and his inexorable pursuer flowing forward through that hole, with never the sound of a footfall, made more terrible *because* of his soundlessness.

London, and the fugitive had thought he would be safe here. Panting, he skidded to a halt where a shaft of light lanced smokily down from a high window and made the cobbles shiny bright. In a black doorway a broken derelict sprawled like a fallen scarecrow, moaned about the night's chill and clutched his empty bottle. Coarse laughter came from above, the chink of glasses and a low-muttered, lewd suggestion. Again the laughter, a woman's, thick with lust.

No refuge here, where the air itself seemed steeped in decay and ingrown vice——but at least there was the light, and humanity too, albeit dregs.

The fugitive hugged the wall, fused with it and became one with the shadows, gratefully gulped at the sodden, reeking river air and looked back the way he had come. And there at the other end of the street, silhouetted against a rolling bank of mist from the river, motionless now and yet full of an awesome kinetic energy, like the still waters of a dam before the gates are opened …

The guttural laughter came again from above, causing the fleeing man to start. Shadow-figures moved ganglingly, apishly together in the beam of light falling on the street, began tearing at each other's clothing. Abruptly the light was switched off, the window slammed shut, and the night and the mist closed in. And along the street the silent pursuer once more took up the chase.

With his strength renewed a little but knowing he was tiring rapidly now, the fugitive pushed himself free of the wall and began to run again, forcing his legs to pump and his lungs to suck and his heart to pound as desperately as before. But he was almost home, almost safe. Sanctuary lay just around the next corner.

‘London’ … ‘home’ … ‘sanctuary’. Words once full of meaning, but in his present situation almost meaningless. Could anywhere be safe ever again? Cairo should have been, but instead, with the European War spilling over into the Middle East, it had been fraught. Paris had been worse: a seething cauldron on the boil and about to explode shatteringly. And in Tunisia … In Tunisia the troubles had seemed endless, where the French fought a guerilla war on all sides, not least with the Sahara’s Sanusi.

The Sanusi, yes—and it was from the secret desert temple of an ancient Sanusi sect that the fugitive had stolen the Elixir. That had been his folly—it was *why* he was a fugitive.

Half-way round the world and back their Priest of the Undying Dead had chased him, drawing ever closer, and here in London it seemed that at last the chase was at an end. He could run no further. It was finished. His only chance was the sanctuary, that secret place remembered from the penniless, friendless childhood of a waif. It had been more than thirty years ago, true, but still he remembered it clearly. And if a long-forsaken God had not turned from him entirely …

Wrapped in mist he rounded the corner, came out of the mazy streets and on to the river's shoulder. The Thames with all its stenches, its poisons, its teeming rats and endless sewage—and its sanctuary. Nothing had changed, all was exactly as he remembered it. Even the mist was his friend now, for it cloaked him and turned him an anonymous grey, and he knew that from here on he could find his way blindfold. Indeed he might as well be blind, the way the milky mist rolled up and swallowed him.

With hope renewed he plunged on across the last deserted street lying parallel to the river, found the high stone wall he knew would be there,

followed it north for fifty yards to where spiked iron palings guarded its topmost tier against unwary climbers. For immediately beyond that wall at this spot the river flowed sluggish and deep and the wall was sheer, so that a man might easily drown if he should slip and fall. But the fugitive did not intend to fall; he was still agile as the boy he'd once been, except that now he also had a grown man's strength.

Without pause he jumped, easily caught the top of the wall, at once transferred his grip to the ironwork. He drew himself up, in a moment straddled the treacherous spikes, swung over and slid down the palings on the other side. And now—now, dear God—only keep the pursuer at bay; only let him stay back there in the mist, out of sight, and not come surging forward with his rotten eyes aglow and his crumbling nose sniffing like that of some great dead nightmare hound!

And now, too, let memory stay sharp and serve the fugitive well, let it not fail him for a single moment, and let everything continue to be as it had been. For if anything had changed beyond that ancient, slimy wall…

… But it had not!

For here, remembered of old, was his marker—the base of a lone paling, bent to one side, like a single idle soldier in a perfect rank—where if he swung his feet a little to the left, in empty space above the darkly gurgling river—

—His left foot made contact with a stone sill, at which he couldn't suppress the smallest cry of relief. Then, clinging to the railings with one hand, he tremblingly reached down the other to find and grip an arch of stone; and releasing his grip on the railings entirely, he drew himself down and into the hidden embrasure in the river's wall. For this was the entrance to his sanctuary.

But no time to pause and thank whichever lucky stars still shone on him; no, for back there in the roiling mist the pursuer was following still, unerringly tracking him, he was sure. Or tracking the Elixir?

Today, for the first time, that idea had dawned on him. It had come as he walked the chill December streets, when patting his overcoat's inside pocket, for a moment he had thought the vial lost. Oh, and how he'd panicked then! But in a shop doorway where his hands trembled violently, finally he'd found the tiny glass bottle where it had fallen through a hole into the lining of his coat, and then in the grey light of wintry, war-depleted London streets, he had gazed at it—and at its contents.

The Elixir—which might as well be water! A few drops of crystal-clear water, yes, that was how it appeared. But if you held it up to the light in a certain way …

The fugitive started, held his breath, stilled his thoughts and brought his fleeting mind back to the present, the Now. Was that a sound from the street above? The faintest echo of a footfall on the cobbles three or four feet overhead?

He crouched there in the dark embrasure, waited, listened with terror-sensitized ears—heard only the pounding of his own heart, his own blood singing in his ears. He had paused here too long, had ignored the Doom hanging over his immortal soul to favour the entirely mortal fatigue of bone and muscle. But now, once more, he forced himself to move. Some rubble blocked the way—blocks of stone, fallen from the low ceiling, perhaps—but he crawled over it, his back brushing the damp stonework overhead. Small furry rodents squealed and fled past him towards the faint light of the entrance, tumbling into the river with tiny splashes. The ceiling dripped with moisture, where nitre stained the walls in faintly luminous patches.

And when at last the fugitive had groped his way well back along the throat of the passage, only then dared he fumble out a match and strike it to flame.

The shadows fled at once; he crouched and peered all about, then sighed and breathed easier; all was unchanged, the years flown between then and now had altered nothing. This was ‘his’ place, his secret place, where he’d come as a boy to escape the drunken wrath of a brutish stepfather. Well, that old swine was dead now, pickled in cheap liquor and undeservingly buried in the grounds of a nearby church. Good luck to him! But the sanctuary remained.

The match burned down, its flame touching the fugitive’s fingers. He dropped it, swiftly struck another, and pushed on along the subterranean passage.

Under a ceiling less than five feet high and arched with ancient stone, he must keep his back bowed; at his elbows the walls gave him six inches to spare on both sides. But while he could go faster now, still he must go quietly for a while yet. The follower had tracked him half-way round the world, tracked him supernaturally. And who could say but that he might track him here, too?

Again he paused, scratched at the stubble on his chin, wondered about the Elixir. Oh, that was what his pursuer wanted, sure enough—but it was not *all* he wanted. No, for his chief objective was the life of the thief! A thief, yes, which was what he had been all of his miserable life. At first a petty thief, then a burglar of some skill and daring (and eventually of some renown, which in the end had forced him abroad), finally a looter of foreign tombs and temples.

Tombs and temples …

Again he thought of the Elixir, that tiny vial in his pocket. If only he had known then … but he had not known. He had thought those damned black Sanusi wizards kept treasure in that dune-hidden place, the tribal treasures of their ancestors; or at least, so he'd been informed by Erik Kuphnas in Tunis. Kuphnas, the dog, himself one of the world's foremost experts in the occult. "Ah!" (he had said), "but they also keep the Elixir there—which is all that interests me. Go there, enter, steal! Keep what you will, but only bring me the Elixir. And never work again, my friend, for that's how well I'll pay you …"

And he had done it! All of his skill went into it, and a deal of luck, too—and for what? No treasure at all, and only the tiny vial in his pocket to show for his trouble. And what trouble! Even now he shuddered, thinking back on those corpse-laden catacombs under the desert.

Straight back to Tunis he'd taken the vial, to Erik Kuphnas where he waited. And: "Do you have it?" The black magician had been frantically eager.

"I might have it," the fugitive had been tantalizingly noncommittal. "I might even sell it—if only I knew what it was. But the truth this time, Erik, for I've had it with lies and tales of priceless treasure."

And Kuphnas had at once answered:

"No use, that vial, to you. No use to anyone who is not utterly pure and completely innocent."

"Oh? And are you those things?"

How Kuphnas had glared at him then. "No," he had answered slowly. "I am not—but neither am I a fool. I would use it carefully, sparingly, and so dilute as to be almost totally leeched of its power. At first, anyway, until I knew what I was dealing with. As to what it is: no man knows that, except perhaps a certain Sanusi wizard. The legends have it that he was a chief

three hundred years ago, and that now he’s high-priest of the cult of the Undying Dead!”

“What?” the fugitive had snorted, and laughed. “What? And you believe such mumbo-jumbo, such utter rubbish?” Then his voice had hardened. “Now for the last time, tell me: *what is it*?”

At that Kuphnas had jumped up, strode to and fro across the fine rugs of his study. “Fool!” he'd hissed, glaring as before. “How may any mere man of the 20th Century “know” what it is? It’s the essence of mandrake, the sweat on the upper lip of a three-day corpse, six grey grains of Ibn Ghazi’s powder. It’s the humor of a zombie's iris, the mist rising up from the Pool of All Knowledge, the pollen-laden breath of a black lotus. Man, I don’t “know” what it is! But I know something of what it can do …”

“I’m still listening,” the fugitive had pressed.

“To one who is pure, innocent, unblemished, the Elixir is a crystal ball, a shewstone, an oracle. A single drop will make such a man—how shall we say?—AWARE!”

“Aware?”

“Yes, but when you say it, say and think it in capitals—AWARE!”

“Ah! It’s a drug—it will heighten a man’s senses.”

“Rather, his perceptions—if you will admit the difference. And it is not a drug. It is the Elixir.”

“Would you recognize it?”

“Instantly!”

“And what will you pay for it?”

“If it’s the real thing—fifty thousand of your pounds!”

“Cash?” (Suddenly the fugitive’s throat had been very dry.)

“Ten thousand now, the rest tomorrow morning.”

And then the fugitive had held out his hand and opened it. There in his palm had lain the vial, a tiny stopper firmly in its neck.

Kuphnas had taken it from him into hands that shook, held it up eagerly to the light from his window. And the vial had lit up at once in a golden glow, as if the occultist had captured a small part of the sun itself! And: “Yes!” he had hissed then. “Yes, this is the Elixir!”

At that the fugitive had snatched it back, held out his hand again. “My ten thousand—on account,” he’d said. “Also, we’ll need an eye-dropper.”

Kuphnas had fetched the money, asked: “And what is this about an eye-dropper?”

“But isn't it obvious? You have given me one fifth of my money, and I will give you one fifth of the Elixir. Three drops, as I reckon it. And the rest tomorrow, when I’m paid.”

Kuphnas had protested, but the fugitive would not be swayed. He gave him three drops, no more. And five minutes later when he left him, already the occultist had been calculating the degree of dilution required for his first experiment. His first, and very likely *only* experiment. Certainly his last.

For when with the dawn the fugitive had returned and passed into Kuphnas’s high-walled courtyard and up the fig-shaded marble steps to his apartments, he had found the exterior louvre doors open; likewise the Moorishly ornate iron lattice beyond them; and in Kuphnas’s study itself—

There on the table, effulgent in the first bright beams of day, a bowl of what appeared to be simple water—and the empty eye-dropper beside it. But of Erik Kuphnas and the fugitive's forty thousand pounds, no sign at all. And then, in the corner of the occultist’s study, tossed down there and crumpled in upon itself, he had spied what seemed to be a piece of old leather or perhaps a large canvas sack; except it was the general *shape* of the thing that attracted the fugitive’s attention. That and the question of what it was doing here in these sumptuous apartments. Only when he moved closer had he seen what it really was: that it had hair and dead, glassy, staring orb-like eyes—Kuphnas’s eyes—still glaring a strange composite glare of shock, horror, and permanently frozen malignance!

Innocence and purity, indeed!

That had been enough for the fugitive: he had fled at once, with nightmare gibbering on his heels, and with something else there, too. For to his knowledge that was when he had first become the fugitive, since when he had always been on the move, always running.

Nor could he scoff any longer at the idea of an undead guardian of that Sanusi temple he’d robbed; for indeed the thing which had followed him, drawing closer every day, and certainly closer with each passing night, was not alive as men understood that word. Oh, he'd seen it often enough—its burning eyes and crumbling features—in various corners of the world, and now here in London finally it had tracked him down, forced him to earth …

His eyes had grown accustomed to the tunnel’s darkness now, where the nitrous walls with their foxfire luminosity sufficed however faintly to light his way, so that matches were no longer required. A good thing, too, for his box was severely depleted. But he had come perhaps, oh, one hundred and

fifty yards along this ancient passage from the river, and knew that it would soon open out into a series of high-vaulted cellars. There would be stone steps leading up, and at their top a dark oak door standing open. Beyond that a high-walled, echoing room—five-sided, containing round its walls five wooden benches, and at its centre a pedestal bearing a stone bowl—would wait within a greater hall which, for all that it remained unseen, the fugitive had always known must be vast. And here a second oaken door would be locked, permitting no further exploration. Or at least, the door had always been locked when he was a boy.

As to what the place was: he had never known for sure, but had often guessed. A library, perhaps, long disused; or some forgotten factory once powered by the river? And the tunnel would have served as an exit route for refuse, with the tidal Thames as the agent of dispersal.

Whichever, to him it had always been a refuge, a sanctuary. And now it must play that role again, at least until the dawn. His pursuer was least active in daylight, so that with luck he should make a clean getaway for parts further afield. Meanwhile …

He was into the vaults now, where ribbed stone ceilings rose to massy keystone centres; and there, beyond this junction of bare subterranean rooms, he recognized at once the old stone steps rising into gloom. Crossing echoing flags to climb those steps, at last he arrived at the door and shouldered it open on hinges which had not known oil for many a year. And as the squealing reverberations died away, so he gazed again into that dusty, cobwebbed pentagon of carved stonework, whose walls partitioned it off from the unseen but definitely sensed far greater hall of which it must be the merest niche.

The light was better here, still faint and confused by dust and ropes of grey cobwebs, but oh so gradually gathering strength as night crept toward day. And there were the benches where often the fugitive had lain through long, lonely nights; and there, too, central in the room, the pedestal and its bowl, but draped now with a white cloth; and over there, set in the farthest of the five walls, the second oaken door … *ajar!*

Hands shaking so badly he could scarce control them, the fugitive struck another match and held it high, driving back the shadows. And there on the stone flags of the floor—footprints other than his own! Fresh prints in the dust of—how many years? The clean sheet, too, draped across the stone basin … what did these things mean?

The fugitive crossed to the basin, turned back a corner of the sheet. Fresh water in the bowl, its surface softly gleaming. He scooped up a little in his hand, sniffed at it, finally drank and slaked his burning thirst.

And as he turned from the pedestal, so he almost collided with a slender, polished wooden pole set in a circular base, whose top branched over the basin. Shaped like a narrow gallows, still the thing was in no way sinister; depending from its bar on a chain of bronze, a burnished hook hung overhead.

The fugitive began to understand where he was, and knew now how to prove his location beyond any further doubt. Quickly he went to the door where it stood ajar, eased it open and stepped through. And then he knew that he was right, knew what this place was and wondered if he really had any right being here. Probably not.

But in any case he could not stay; the dawn would soon be breaking, when once more he would be safe; he had far, far to go before night fell again. He re-entered the five-sided room, crossed its floor, paused at the pedestal and bowl to adjust the sheet where he'd disturbed it. And that was when the idea came to him and fixed itself in his mind.

He took out the vial and held it up in the gloom, and feeble though the light was, still the Elixir gathered to itself a faintly roseate glow. Was this really what the follower sought? Was this truly the purpose of the pursuit? Yes, it must be so. And which was that worm-ravaged ghoul compelled to track: flesh and blood thief, or the object of his thievery? Could the creature be thrown off the trail? And in any case, what good to anyone was the Elixir now?

A good many questions, and the fugitive knew the answers to none of them, not for certain. But there might be a way to find out.

Again, quickly, he turned back the corner of the sheet, unstoppered the tiny bottle, held his face well away and poured the contents out into the stone bowl. Glancing from the corner of his eye, he saw a faint glimmer of gold passing like a stray beam of sunlight over the surface of the water, watched it fade as those smallest of ripples grew still.

There, it was done. He sighed, stoppered the vial, replaced it in his pocket and moved on.

Back through the door at the top of the steps he went, and down those steps to the vault, and so once more to the claustrophobic passage under the earth. Dawn must be mere minutes away; surely by now the pursuer had

given up the chase, hidden himself away for the day to come? With his footsteps ringing in his ears, so the fugitive retraced his steps, clambered over the fallen debris close to the entrance, finally stuck his head out of the embrasure in the wall and gazed out over the river.

Not quite dawn yet, no, but there on a distant horizon, on grey roofs a pinkish stain which heralded the rising sun; and already the mist settling back to the river, where it curled like a thick topping of ethereal cream. There was a riming of frost on the stonework now, perhaps the first of winter, but the fugitive ignored the cold as he put up a groping hand to blindly discover and clutch an iron paling. Then, without pause, he swung himself out of the embrasure and began to climb—

—Only to freeze in that position as irresistible fingers grasped his wrists and drew him effortlessly up!

The pursuer! There beyond the palings, clinging like a great black leech to the wall! And when their faces were level, when only the iron palings separated them—how the fugitive would have screamed then. But he could not; for transferring both of his trapped wrists to one black and leathery and impossibly powerful claw, the pursuer had shoved his free hand between the bars and *into* his forehead!

The fugitive knew what was happening. He could feel this monstrous undead creature's fingers groping in his brain, fumbling among all his secrets. Also, he knew he was a dead man. The black zombie's fingers had gone into his head effortlessly, flowing into flesh and bone and painlessly mingling—but they need not necessarily come out the same way. And it could be just as slow as the monster wished it. What was that for a way to die?

Hope does not always spring eternal—not when you gaze into eyes like coals under a bellows, worn by a creature spawned in hell.

The fugitive filled his mouth and spat straight into those blazing eyes.

The fingers at once shifted their position in his head, solidified, were withdrawn through his eyes, taking the eyeballs with them. Blood and brains spouted in twin jets. Still clinging to the palings like a leech, the thing jerked the fugitive's head up and quickly back down, impaling it on one of the spikes. His arms and legs flew outwards, jerked spastically, fell back loosely. And he twitched. Not life but death.

The cursed thing sniffed his corpse with tattered nostrils, found nothing. It plucked him from the palings and tossed him down. The mist parted for a

moment as he struck the water, then rolled back and eddied as before…

Dawn was only a minute or two away and the dead thing knew it. He also knew where the fugitive had been, or at least where he had come from. Like treacle his body dissolved and flowed through the bars on top of the wall, and down into the embrasure where he quickly reassembled. And following the fugitive's old route, the monster flowed forward in darkness, along the passage to the vaults, through them to the upward-leading steps.

Here the thing paused as it felt the first waves of some unknown force, the presence of a Power. But dawn was coming, and the Elixir remained to be found. It flowed forward up the steps, flowed like smoke through the open door and into the five-sided room—and paused again.

Yes, the Elixir was here. Somewhere. *Here!* But something else was here too. The Power was stronger, unbearably strong …

Moora Dunda Sanusi crossed the floor to the second door, leaving no footprints. But at the door he paused a third time before something which angered him to a frenzy of hate, something he could not see, something in the air and in the stone and filling the very ether. And in that same instant the sun’s first rays struck on high, dusty windows and penetrated them, falling in splintered beams within—beams with all the colours of the rainbow!

Dawn and the light it brought increased the unseen Power tenfold. Moora Dunda Sanusi’s magic began to fail him. Unwanted solidity returned and gave him weight, and faint prints began to show in the dust where he staggered backwards, driven back into the five-sided room and across its stone paving. He reeled against the pedestal and displaced the bowl’s sheet, and a flailing hand fell for a moment into the gleaming water.

Agony! Impossible agony! The thing which Dunda was should feel no pain for it had no life as such—and yet there was pain. And Moora Dunda Sanusi knew that pain at once, and knew its source—the Elixir. The Elixir, yes, but no longer contained, no longer safe.

The thing snatched its mummied claw from the water, reeled towards the steps which led down into darkness and safety. But the place was sanctuary no longer. Not for such as Moora Dunda Sanusi, dead for more than two hundred and seventy years. Striking from above through many high-arched, stained-glass windows, the sun’s rays formed a fiery lattice of lances, stabbing down into the five-sided room and converging on the undead thing, consuming it even as the Elixir consumed its arm.

Clutching that melting member to him, the zombie crumpled in reeking silence to the flags, foul smoke billowing outwards and bearing his substance away. In a moment the fires in his eyes flickered low, and in the next blinked out, extinguished. The final, solitary sound he made was a sigh of great peace long overdue, and then he was gone.

A breeze, blowing in under the doors of the ancient church, scattered what was left and blended it with the dust of decades …

The sun came up and London's mists dispersed. Dawn grew into a bright December day.

A local vicar, hurrying along the riverside streets, paused to glance at his watch. 10.00 a.m.—they would be waiting. He made his legs go faster, clucked his tongue against his teeth in annoyance. It was all so irregular. Very irregular, but hardly improper. And of course the family were well-known church benefactors. And maybe it wasn't so irregular after all; for all of the line's children *had* been christened in the old church for several centuries now. A matter of tradition, really …

Turning a corner away from the river, the vicar came in view of the church, saw its steeple rising against the sky, where many slates were loose or missing altogether; its beautiful windows, some broken, but all doomed now to demolition, along with the rest of the fine old structure. And they called this progress! But it was still consecrated, still holy, still a proper house of God. For a few weeks more, anyway.

He saw, too, his verger, sneaking along the street with his collar up, coming away from the church—and the vicar nodded grimly to himself. Oh, yes? But he'd told him to see to the old place a full week ago, and not leave it until the last minute.

Approaching, finally the verger saw him, saw too that he was identified. His frown turned to a smile in a moment; he came directly forward, beaming at the vicar. "Ah, vicar! All's prepared; I've spent the better part of two whole hours in there! But the dust and cobwebs—incredible! I did come round earlier in the week, but such a lot to do that

"All is understood," the vicar nodded, holding up his hand. And: "Are they waiting?"

"Indeed they are—just arrived. I told them you'd be along directly."

"I'm sure you did," the vicar nodded again. "Well, I'd best be seeing to it then."

A moment later the churchyard was in view, and there up the path between old headstones, just inside the arched, impressive entrance, where the massive doors stood open, the couple themselves and a handful of friends. They saw the vicar hurrying, came to greet him; the normal pleasantries were exchanged; the party entered the towering old building. The vicar had brought the books with him and all preliminaries and signatures and counter-signatures were quickly completed; the little ceremony commenced without a hitch.

Finally the vicar took the crucifix from around his neck and hung it from the hook over the font, held out his arms for the child. He'd done it all a thousand times before, so that it was difficult these days to get any real meaning into the words; but of course they had meaning anyway, and in any case he tried.

And at last all was done. The vicar dipped his hand into the water, sprinkled droplets, made the sign—and the church seemed to hold its breath …

But only for an instant.

Then the five-sided room came alive in a glow like burnished gold (the sun, of course, moving out from behind a cloud, burning on the old windows), and smiling, the vicar passed the child in his christening-gown to his father.

"So there we have you," said the proud, handsome man, his voice deep and strong; and he showed the child to his mother.

A rose of a woman, she gazed with love on the infant, kissed his brow. "Those eyes," she said, "with so much still to see. And that little mind, with so much still to fill it. Look at his face—see how it glows!"

"It's the light in here," said the vicar. "It turns the skin to roses! Ah, but indeed a beautiful child."

"Oh, he is!" said the mother, taking him and holding him up. "He is! So pure, so innocent. Our little Titus. Our little Titus Crow …"

LORD OF THE WORMS

Twenty-two is the Number of the *Master! A 22 may only be described in glowing* terms, *for he is the Great Man. Respected, admired by all who know him, he has the Intellect and the Power—and he has the Magic! Aye, he is the Master Magician. But a word of warning*: *just as there* are Day *and Night, so* are *there two sorts of Magic—White, and Black!*

Grossmann's Numerology, Vienna, *1776*

I

The war was well over, Christmas 1945 had gone by and the New Year festivities were still simmering, and Titus Crow was out of a job. A young man whose bent for the dark and mysterious side of life had early steeped him in obscure occult and esoteric matters, his work for the War Department had moved in two seemingly unconnected, highly secretive directions. On the one hand he had advised the Ministry in respect of certain of Der Fuhrer's supernatural interests, and on the other he had used the skills of the numerologist and cryptographer to crack the codes of his goose-stepping war machine. In both endeavours there had been a deal of success, but now the thing was finished and Titus Crow's talents were superfluous.

Now he was at a loss how best to employ himself. Not yet known as one of the world's foremost occultists, nor even suspecting the brilliance he was yet to achieve in many diverse fields of study and learning—and yet fully conscious of the fact that there was much to be done and a course to be run—for the moment he felt without a purpose, a feeling not much to his liking. And this after living and working in bomb-ravaged London through the war years, with the fever and stress of that conflict still bottled inside him.

For these reasons he was delighted when Julian Carstairs—the so-called "Modern Magus", or "Lord of the Worms", an eccentric cult- or coven-leader—accepted his agreeable response to an advertisement for a young man to undertake a course of secretarial duties at Carstairs' country home, the tenure of the position not to exceed three months. The money seemed good (though that was not of prime importance), and part of the work would consist of cataloguing Carstairs' enviable occult library. Other than

this the advertisement had not been very specific; but Titus Crow had little doubt but that he would find much of interest in the work and eagerly awaited the day of his first meeting with Carstairs, a man he assumed to be more eccentric than necromantic.

Wednesday 9 January 1946 was that day, and Crow found the address, “The Barrows”,—a name which immediately conjured mental pictures of tumuli and cromlechs—at the end of a wooded, winding private road not far from the quaint and picturesque town of Haslemere in Surrey. A large, two-storey house surrounded by a high stone wall and expansive gardens of dark shrubbery, overgrown paths and gaunt-limbed oaks weighed down with festoons of unchecked ivy, the place stood quite apart from any comparable habitation.

That the house had at one time been a residence of great beauty seemed indisputable; but equally obvious was the fact that recently, possibly due to the hostilities, it had been greatly neglected. And quite apart from this air of neglect and the generally drear appearance of any country property in England during the first few weeks of the year, there was also a gloominess about The Barrows. Something inherent in its grimy upper windows, in the oak-shaded brickwork and shrouding shrubbery; so that Crow’s pace grew measured and just a trifle hesitant as he entered the grounds through a creaking iron gate and followed first the drive, then a briar-tangled path to the front door.

And then, seeming to come too close on the heels of Crow’s ringing of the bell, there was the sudden opening of the great door and the almost spectral face and figure of Julian Carstairs himself, whose appearance the young applicant saw from the start was not in accordance with his preconceptions. Indeed, such were Carstairs’ looks that what little remained of Crow’s restrained but ever-present exuberance was immediately extinguished. The man’s aspect was positively dismal.

Without introduction, without even offering his hand, Carstairs led him through the gloomy interior to the living-room—a room sombre with shadows which seemed almost painted into the dark oak panelling. There, switching on lighting so subdued that it did absolutely nothing to dispel the drabness of the place or its fungus taint of dry rot, finally Carstairs introduced himself and bade his visitor be seated. But still he did not offer his hand.

Now, despite the poor light, Crow was able to take in something of the aspect of this man who was to be, however temporarily, his employer; and what he saw was not especially reassuring. Extremely tall and thin almost to the point of emaciation, with a broad forehead, thick dark hair and bushy eyebrows, Carstairs' pallor was one with the house. With sunken cheeks and slightly stooped shoulders, he could have been any age between seventy and eighty-five, perhaps even older. Indeed there was that aura about him, hinting of a delayed or altered process of ageing, which one usually associates with mummies in their museum alcoves.

Looking yet more closely at his face (but guardedly and as unobtrusively as possible), Crow discovered the pocks, cracks and wrinkles of years without number; as if Carstairs had either lived well beyond his time, or had packed far too much into a single lifespan. And again the younger man found himself comparing his host to a sere and dusty mummy.

And yet there was also a wisdom in those dark eyes, which at least redeemed for the moment an otherwise chill and almost alien visage. While Crow could in no wise appreciate the outer shell of the man, he believed that he might yet find virtue in his knowledge, the occult erudition with which it was alleged Carstairs had become endowed through a life of remote travels and obscure delvings. And certainly there was that of the scholar about him, or at least of the passionate devotee.

There was a hidden strength there, too, which seemed to belie the supposed age-lines graven in his face and bony hands; and as soon as he commenced to speak, in a voice at once liquid and sonorous, Crow was aware that he was up against a man of great power. At length, after a brief period of apparently haphazard questioning and trivial discourse, Carstairs abruptly asked him the date of his birth. Having spoken he grew silent, his eyes sharp as he watched Crow's reaction and waited for his answer.

Caught off guard for a moment, Crow felt a chill strike him from nowhere, as if a door had suddenly opened on a cold and hostile place; and some sixth sense warned him against all logic that Carstairs' question was fraught with danger, like the muzzle of a loaded pistol placed to his temple. And again illogically, almost without thinking, he supplied a fictitious answer which added four whole years to his actual age:

"Why, 2 December 1912," he answered with a half-nervous smile. "Why do you ask?"

For a moment Carstairs' eyes were hooded, but then they opened in a beaming if cadaverous smile. He issued a sigh, almost of relief, saying: “I was merely confirming my suspicion, astrologically speaking, that perhaps you were a Sagittarian—which of course you are. You see, the sidereal science is a consuming hobby of mine, as are a great many of the so-called “abstruse arts”. I take it you are aware of my reputation? That my name is linked with all manner of unspeakable rites and dark practices? That according to at least one daily newspaper I am, or believe myself to be, the very antichrist?” And he nodded and mockingly smiled. “Of course you are. Well, the truth is far less damning, I assure you. I dabble a little, certainly—mainly to entertain my friends with certain trivial talents, one of which happens to be astrology—but as for necromancy and the like … I ask you, Mr Crow—in this day and age?” And again he offered his skull-like smile.

Before the younger man could make any sort of comment to fill the silence fallen over the room, his host spoke again, asking, “And what are your interests, Mr. Crow?”

“My interests? Why—” But at the last moment, even as Crow teetered on the point of revealing that he, too, was a student of the esoteric and occult—though a white as opposed to a black magician—so he once more felt that chill as of outer immensities and, shaking himself from a curious lethargy, noticed how large and bright the other’s eyes had grown. And at that moment Crow knew how close he had come to falling under Carstairs’ spell, which must be a sort of hypnosis. He quickly gathered his wits and feigned a yawn.

“You really must excuse me, sir,” he said then, “for my unpardonable boorishness. I don't know what’s come over me that I should feel so tired. I fear I was almost asleep just then.”

Then, fearing that Carstairs’ smile had grown more than a little forced—thwarted, almost—and that his nod was just a fraction too curt, he quickly continued: “My interests are common enough. A little archaeology, palaeontology…”

“Common, indeed!” answered Carstairs with a snort. “Not so, for such interests show an enquiring nature, albeit for things long passed away. No, no, those are admirable pastimes for such a young man.” And he pursed his thin lips and fingered his chin a little before asking:

“But surely, what with the war and all, archaeological work has suffered greatly. Not much of recent interest there?”

“On the contrary,” Crow answered at once, “1939 was an exceptional year. The rock-art of Hoggar and the excavations at Brek in Syria; the Nigerian Ife bronzes; Bleger’s discoveries at Pylos and Wace’s at Mycenae; Sir Leonard Woolley and the Hittites … Myself, I was greatly interested in the Oriental Institute's work at Megiddo in Palestine. That was in ’37. Only a bout of ill health held me back from accompanying my father out to the site.”

“Ah!—your interest is inherited then? Well, do not concern yourself that you missed the trip. Megiddo was not especially productive. Our inscrutable oriental friends might have found more success to the north-east, a mere twenty-five or thirty miles.”

“On the shores of Galilee?” Crow was mildly amused at the other’s assumed knowledge of one of his pet subjects.

“Indeed,” answered Carstairs, his tone bone dry. “The sands of time have buried many interesting towns and cities on the shores of Galilee. But tell me: what are your thoughts on the Lascaux cave-paintings, discovered in, er, ’38?”

“No, in 1940,” Crow’s smile disappeared as he suddenly realized he was being tested, that Carstairs’ knowledge of archaeology - certainly recent digs and discoveries—was at least the equal of his own. “September, 1940. They are without question the work of Cro-Magnon man, some 20-25,000 years old.”

“Good!” Carstairs beamed again, and Crow suspected that he had passed the test.

Now his gaunt host stood up to tower abnormally tall even over his tall visitor. “Very well, I think you will do nicely, Mr. Crow. Come then, and I’ll show you my library. It’s there you will spend most of your time, after all, and you’ll doubtless be pleased to note that the room has a deal more natural light than the rest of the house. Plenty of windows. Barred windows, for of course many of my books are quite priceless.”

Leading the way through gloomy and maze-like corridors, he mused: “Of course, the absence of light suits me admirably. I am hemeralopic. You may have noticed how large and dark my eyes are in the gloom? Yes, and that is why there are so few strong electric lights in the house. I hope that does not bother you?”

“Not at all,” Crow answered, while in reality he felt utterly hemmed in, taken prisoner by the mustiness of dry rot and endless, stifling corridors.

“And you're a rock-hound, too, are you?” Carstairs continued. “That is interesting. Did you know that fossil lamp-shells, of the sort common here in the south, were once believed to be the devil’s cast-off toenails?” He laughed a mirthless, baying laugh. “Ah, what it is to live in an age enlightened by science, eh?”

II

Using a key to unlock the library door, he ushered Crow into a large room, then stooped slightly to enter beneath a lintel uncomfortably shallow for a man of his height. “And here we are,” he unnecessarily stated, staggering slightly and holding up a hand to ward off the weak light from barred windows. “My eyes,” he offered by way of an explanation. “I’m sure you will understand …”

Quickly crossing the carpeted floor, he drew shades until the room stood in sombre shadows. “The lights are here,” he said, pointing to switches on the wall. “You are welcome to use them when I am not present. Very well, Mr. Crow, this is where you are to work. Oh, and by the way: I agree to your request as stated in your letter of introduction, that you be allowed your freedom at weekends. That suits me perfectly well, since weekends are really the only suitable time for our get-togethers—that is to say, when I entertain a few friends.

“During the week, however, you would oblige me by staying here. Behind the curtains in the far wall is a lighted alcove, which I have made comfortable with a bed, a small table and a chair. I assure you that you will not be disturbed. I will respect your privacy—on the understanding of course, that you will respect mine; with regard to which there are certain house rules, as it were. You are not to have guests or visitors up to the house under any circumstances—The Barrows is forbidden to all outsiders. And the cellar is quite out of bounds. As for the rest of the house: with the sole exception of my study, it is yours to wander or explore as you will—though I suspect you’ll have little enough time for that. In any case, the place is quite empty. And that is how I like it.

“You do understand that I can only employ you for three months? Good. You shall be paid monthly, in advance, and to ensure fair play and good will on both sides I shall require you to sign a legally binding contract. I do not want you walking out on me with the job only half completed.

“As for the work: that should be simple enough for anyone with the patience of the archaeologist, and I will leave the system entirely up to you. Basically, I require that all my books should be put in order, first by category, then by author, and alphabetically in the various categories. Again, the breakdown will be entirely your concern. All of the work must, however, be cross-referenced; and finally I shall require a complete listing of books by title, and once again alphabetically. Now, are you up to it?”

Crow glanced around the room, at its high shelves and dusty, book-littered tables. Books seemed to be piled everywhere. There must be close on seven or eight thousand volumes here! Three months no longer seemed such a great length of time. On the other hand, from what little he had seen of the titles of some of these tomes …

“I am sure,” he finally answered, “that my work will be to your complete satisfaction.”

“Good!” Carstairs nodded. “Then today being three-quarters done, I suggest we now retire to the dining-room for our evening meal, following which you may return here if you so desire and begin to acquaint yourself with my books. Tomorrow, Thursday, you begin your work proper, and I shall only disturb you on those rare occasions when I myself visit the library, or perhaps periodically to see how well or ill you are progressing. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” answered Crow, and he once more followed his host and employer out into the house's airless passages. On their way Carstairs handed him the key to the library door, saying:

“You shall need this, I think.” And seeing Crow’s frown he explained, “The house has attracted several burglars in recent years, hence the bars at most of the windows. If such a thief did get in, you would be perfectly safe locked in the library.”

“I can well look after myself, Mr Carstairs,” said Crow.

“I do not doubt it,” answered the other, “but my concern is not entirely altruistic. If you remain safe, Mr Crow, then so do my books.” And once again his face cracked open in that hideous smile …

They ate at opposite ends of a long table in a dimly-lit dining-room whose gloom was one with the rest of the house. Titus Crow’s meal consisted of cold cuts of meat and red wine, and it was very much to his liking; but he did note that Carstairs’ plate held different fare, reddish and

of a less solid consistency, though the distance between them forbade any closer inspection. They ate in silence and when finished Carstairs led the way to the kitchen, a well-equipped if dingy room with a large, well-stocked larder.

"From now on," Carstairs explained in his sepulchral voice, "you are to prepare your own meals. Eat what you will, everything here is for you. My own needs are slight and I usually eat alone; and of course there are no servants here. I did note, however, that you enjoy wine. Good, so do I. Drink what you will, for there is more than sufficient and my cellar is amply stocked."

"Thank you," Crow answered. "And now, if I may, there are one or two points …"

"By all means."

"I came by car, and—"

"Ah! Your motor-car, yes. Turn left on the drive as you enter through the gate. There you will find a small garage. Its door is open. Better that you leave your car there during the week, or else as winter lengthens the engine is sure to suffer. Now then, is there anything else?"

"Will I need a key?" Crow asked after a moment's thought. "A key to the house, I mean, for use when I go away at weekends?"

"No requirement," Carstairs shook his head. "I shall be here to see you off on Fridays, and to welcome you when you return on Monday mornings."

"Then all would appear to be very satisfactory. I do like fresh air, however, and would appreciate the occasional opportunity to walk in your gardens."

"In my wilderness, do you mean?" and Carstairs gave a throaty chuckle. "The place is so overgrown I should fear to lose you. But have no fear—the door of the house will not be locked during the day. All I would ask is that when I am not here you are careful not to lock yourself out."

"Then that appears to be that," said Crow. "It only remains for me to thank you for the meal—and of course to offer to wash the dishes."

"Not necessary." Again Carstairs shook his head. "On this occasion I shall do it; in future we shall do our own. Now I suggest you garage your car."

He led Crow from the kitchen, through gloomy passages to the outer door, and as they went the younger man remembered a sign he had seen

affixed to the ivy-grown garden wall. When he mentioned it, Carstairs once more gave his throaty chuckle. “Ah, yes—“Beware of the Dog!” There is no dog, Mr. Crow. The sign is merely to ensure that my privacy is not disturbed. In fact I hate dogs, and dogs hate me!”

On that note Crow left the house, parked his car in the garage provided, and finally returned to Carstairs’ library. By this time his host had gone back to the study or elsewhere and Crow was left quite alone. Entering the library he could not help but lick his lips in anticipation. If only one or two of the titles he had seen were the actual books they purported to be … then Carstairs' library was a veritable goldmine of occult lore! He went directly to the nearest bookshelves and almost immediately spotted half a dozen titles so rare as to make them half-fabulous. Here was an amazingly pristine copy of du Nord’s *Liber Ivonie*, and another of Prinn’s *De Vermis Mysteriis.* And these marvellous finds were simply inserted willy-nilly in the shelves, between such mundane or common treatises as Miss Margaret Murray's *WitchCult* and the much more doubtful works of such as Mme Blavatsky and Scott-Elliot.

A second shelf supported d’Erlette’s *Cultes des Goules,* Gauthier de Metz’ *Image du Mond,* and Artephous’ *The Key of Wisdom*. A third was filled with an incredible set of volumes concerning the theme of oceanic mysteries and horrors, with such sinister-sounding titles as Gantley's *Hydrophinnae,* the *Cthaat Aquadingen,* the German *Untersee Kulte*n, le Fe’s *Dwellers in the Depths,* and Konrad von Gerner’s *Fischhuch,* circa 1598.

Moving along the shelved wall, Crow felt his body break out in a sort of cold sweat at the mere thought of the value of these books, let alone their contents, and such was the list of recognizably ‘priceless’ volumes that he soon began to lose all track of the titles. Here were the *Pnakotic Manuscripts,* and here *The Seven Cryptical Books of Hsan;* until finally, on coming across the *R’lyeh Text* and, at the very last, an ancient, ebony-bound, gold- and silver arabesqued tome which purported to be none other than the *Al Azif* itself! … he was obliged to sit down at one of the dusty tables and take stock of his senses.

It was only then, as he unsteadily seated himself and put a hand up to his fevered brow, that he realized all was not well with him. He felt clammy from the sweat which had broken out on him while looking at the titles of the books, and his mouth and throat had been strangely dry ever since he

sampled (too liberally, perhaps?) Carstairs' wine. But this dizziness clinched it. He did not think that he had taken overmuch wine, but then again he had not recognized the stuff and so had not realized its potency. Very well, in future he would take only a single glass. He did not give thought, not at this point, to the possibility that the wine might have been drugged.

Without more ado, still very unsteady on his feet, he got up, put on the light in the alcove where his bed lay freshly made, turned off the library lights proper, and stumblingly retired. Almost before his head hit the pillow he was fast asleep.

H*e dreamed:*

The alcove was in darkness but dim moonlight entered the library through the barred windows in beams which moved with the stirring of trees in the garden. The curtains were open and four dark-robed, hooded strangers stood about his bed, their half-luminous eyes fixed upon him. Then one of them bent forward and Crow sensed that it was Carstairs.

“Is he sleeping, Master?” an unknown voice asked in a reedy whisper.

“Yes, like a baby,” Carstairs answered. “The open, staring eyes are a sure sign of the drug’s efficacy. What do you think of him?”

A third voice, deep and gruff, chuckled obscenely. “Oh, he’ll do well enough, Master. Another forty or fifty years for you here.”

“Be quiet!” Carstairs immediately hissed, his dark eyes bulging in anger. “You are never to mention that again, neither here nor anywhere else!”

“Master,” the man’s voice was now a gasp. “I’m sorry! I didn’t realize __”

Carstairs snorted his contempt. “None of you ever realize,” he said.

“What of his sign, Master?” asked the fourth and final figure, in a voice as thickly glutinous as mud. “Is it auspicious?”

“Indeed it is. He is a Sagittarian, as am I. And his numbers are … most propitious.” Carstairs’ voice was now a purr. “Not only does his name have nine letters, but in the orthodox system his birth-number is twenty-seven—a triple nine. Totalled individually, however, his date gives an even better result, for the sum is eighteen!”

”The triple six!” the other’s gasp was involuntary.

“Indeed,” said Carstairs.

“Well, he seems tall and strong enough, Master,” said the voice of the one already chastised. “A fitting receptacle, it would seem.”

“Damn you!” Carstairs rounded on him at once. “Fool! How many times must I repeat—” and for a moment, consumed with rage, his hissing voice broke. Then, “Out! Out! There’s work for you fools, and for the others. But hear me now: he is The One, I assure you—and he came of his own free will, which is as it must always be.”

Three of the figures melted away into darkness but Carstairs stayed. He looked down at Crow one last time, and in a low, even whisper said, “It was a dream. Anything you may remember of this was only a dream. It is not worth remembering, Mr Crow. Not worth it at all. Only a dream … a dream … a dream …” Then he stepped back and closed the curtains, shutting out the moonbeams and leaving the alcove in darkness. But for a long time it seemed to the sleeping man in the bed that Carstairs’ eyes hung over him in the night like the smile of the Cheshire cat in *Alice.*

Except that they were malign beyond mortal measure …

III

In the morning, with weak, grime-filtered January sunlight giving the library a dull, time-worn appearance more in keeping with late afternoon than morning, Crow awakened, stretched and yawned. He had not slept well and had a splitting headache; which itself caused him to remember his vow of the previous night, to treat his employer’s wine with more respect in future. He remembered, too, something of his dream—something vaguely frightening—but it had been only a dream and not worth remembering. Not worth it at all…

Nevertheless, still lying abed, he struggled for a little while to force memories to the surface of his mind. They were there, he was sure, deep down in his subconscious. But they would not come. That the dream had concerned Carstairs and a number of other, unknown men, he was sure, but its details … (he shrugged the thing from his mind) were not worth remembering.

Yet still he could not rid himself of the feeling that he *should* remember, if only for his own peace of mind. There was that frustrating feeling of having a word on the tip of one’s tongue, only to find it slipping away before it can be voiced. After the dream there had been something else—a continuation, perhaps—but this was far less vague and shadowy. It had seemed to Crow that he had heard droning chants or liturgies of some sort

or other echoing up from the very bowels of the house. From the cellars? Well, possibly that had been a mental hangover from Carstairs' statement that the cellars were out of bounds. Perhaps, subconsciously, he had read something overly sinister into the man's warning in that respect.

But talking—or rather thinking—of hangovers, the one he had was developing into something of a beauty! Carstairs' wine? Potent? … Indeed!

He got up, put on his dressing-gown, went in search of the bathroom and from there, ten minutes later and greatly refreshed, to the dining-room. There he found a brief note, signed by Carstairs, telling him that his employer would be away all day and urging an early start on his work. Crow shrugged, breakfasted, cleared up after himself and prepared to return to the library. But as he was putting away his dishes he came upon a packet of Aspros, placed conspicuously to hand. And now he had to smile at Carstairs' perception. Why, the man had known he would suffer from last night's over-indulgence, and these pills were to ensure Crow's clear-headedness as he commenced his work!

His amusement quickly evaporated, however, as he moved from kitchen to library and paused to ponder the best way to set about the job. For the more he looked at and handled these old books, the more the feeling grew within him that Carstairs' passion lay not in the ownership of such volumes but in their use. And if that were the case, then yesterday's caution - however instinctive, involuntary—might yet prove to have stood him in good stead. He thought back to Carstairs' question about his date of birth, and of the man's alleged interest—his 'consuming' interest—in astrology. Strange, then, that there was hardly a single volume on that subject to be found amongst all of these books!

Not so strange, though, that in answer to Carstairs' question he had lied. For as a numerologist Crow had learned something of the importance of names, numbers and dates—especially to an occultist! No magician in all the long, macabre history of mankind would ever have let the date of his birth be known to an enemy, nor even his name, if that were at all avoidable. For who could tell what use the other might make of such knowledge, these principal factors affecting a man's destiny?

In just such recesses of the strange and mystical mind were born such phrases of common, everyday modern usage as: "That bullet had his number on it", and, "His number is up!" And where names were concerned: from Man's primal beginnings the name was the identity, the very spirit,

and any wizard who knew a man's name might use it against him. The Holy Bible was full of references to the secrecy and sanctity of names, such as the third and 'secret' name of the rider of the Horse of Revelations, or that of the angel visiting Samson's father, who asked: "Why asketh thou then after my name, seeing it is secret?" And the Bible was modern fare compared with certain Egyptian legends concerning the use of names in inimical magic. Well, too late to worry about that now; but in any case, while Carstairs had Crow's name, at least he did not have his number.

And what had been that feeling, Crow wondered, come over him when the occultist had asked about his interests, his hobbies? At that moment he would have been willing to swear that the man had almost succeeded in hypnotizing him. And again, for some reason he had been prompted to lie; or if not to lie, to tell only half the truth. Had that, too, been some mainly subconscious desire to protect his identity? If so, why? What possible harm could Carstairs wish to work upon him? The idea was quite preposterous.

As for archaeology and palaeontology: Crow's interest was quite genuine and his knowledge extensive, but so too (apparently) was Carstairs'. What had the man meant by suggesting that the Oriental Institute's expedition might have had more success digging in Galilee?

On impulse Crow took down a huge, dusty Atlas of the world—by no means a recent edition—and turned its thick, well-thumbed pages to the Middle East, Palestine and the Sea of Galilee. Here, in the margin, someone had long ago written in reddish, faded ink the date 1602; and on the map itself, in the same sepia, three tiny crosses had been marked along the north shore of Galilee. Beside the centre cross was the word 'Chorazin'.

Now this was a name Crow recognized at once. He went back to the shelves and after some searching found a good copy of John Kitto's *Illustrated Family Bible* in two volumes, carrying the bulky second volume back to his table. In Matthew and in Luke he quickly located the verses he sought, going from them to the notes at the end of Chapter 10 of Luke. There, in respect of Verse 13, he found the following note:

> *Chorazin*—This place is nowhere mentioned but in this and the parallel texts, and in these only by way of reference. It would seem to have been a town of some note, on the shores of the Lake of Galilee, and near Capernaum, along with which and Bethsaide its name occurs. The answer of the natives to Dr Richardson, when he enquired concerning Capernaum (see the note on iv, 31), connected Chorazin in the same manner with that city …

Crow checked the specified note and found a further reference to Chorazin, called by present-day natives ‘Chorasi’ and lying in extensive and ancient ruins. Pursing his lips, Crow now returned to the Atlas and frowned again at the map of Galilee with its three crosses. If the central one was Chorazin, or the place now occupied by its ruins, then the other two probably identified Bethsaide and Capernaum, all cursed and their destruction foretold by Jesus. As Carstairs had observed: the sands of time had indeed buried many interesting towns and cities on the shores of Galilee.

And so much for John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A. A massive and scholarly work to be sure, his great Bible—but he might have looked a little deeper into the question of Chorazin. For to Crow’s knowledge this was one of the birthplaces of ‘the antichrist’—which birth, in its most recent manifestation, had supposedly taken place about the year 1602 …

Titus Crow would have dearly loved to research Carstairs’ background, discover his origins and fathom the man’s nature and occult directions; so much so that he had to forcefully remind himself that he was not here as a spy but an employee, and that as such he had work to do. Nor was he loath to employ himself on Carstairs’ books, for the occultist’s collection was in a word marvellous.

With all of his own esoteric interest, Crow had never come across so fantastic an assemblage of books in his life, not even in the less-public archives of such authoritative establishments as the British Museum and the Bibliotheque Nationale. In fact, had anyone previously suggested that such a private collection existed, Crow might well have laughed. Quite apart from the expense necessarily incurred in building such a collection, where could a man possibly find the time required and the dedication in a single lifetime? But it was another and to Crow far more astonishing aspect of the library which gave him his greatest cause to ponder: namely the incredible carelessness or sheer ignorance of anyone who could allow such a collection to fall into such disorder, disuse and decay.

For certainly decay was beginning to show; there were signs of it all about, some of them of the Worst sort. Even as midday arrived and he put aside his first rough notes and left the library for the kitchen, just such a sign made itself apparent. It was a worm—a bookworm, Crow supposed, though he had no previous experience of them—which he spotted crawling

on the carpeted floor just within the library door. Picking the thing up, he discovered it to be fat, pinkish, vaguely morbid in its smell and cold to the touch. He would have expected a bookworm to be smaller, drier, more insect-like. This thing was more like a maggot! Quickly he turned back into the room, crossed the floor, opened a small window through the vertical bars and dropped the offensive creature into the dark shrubbery. And before making himself a light lunch he very scrupulously washed and dried his hands.

The rest of the day passed quickly and without incident, and Crow forswore dinner until around 9 p.m. when he began to feel hungry and not a little weary. In the interim he had made his preliminary notes, decided upon categories, and toward the last he had begun to move books around and clear a shelf upon which to commence the massive job of work before him.

For a meal this time he heated the contents of a small flat tin of excellent sliced beef, boiled a few potatoes and brewed up a jug of coffee; and last but not least, he placed upon the great and otherwise empty table a single glass and one of Carstairs' obscure but potent bottles. On this occasion, however, he drank only one glass, and then not filled to the brim. And later, retiring to his alcove with a book—E. L. de Marigny's entertaining *The Tarot*: *a Treatise*—he congratulated himself upon his restraint. He felt warm and pleasantly drowsy, but in no way intoxicated as he had felt on the previous night. About 10.30, when he caught himself nodding, he went to bed and slept soundly and dreamlessly all through the night.

Friday went by very quietly, without Crow once meeting, seeing or hearing Carstairs, so that he could not even be sure that the man was at home. This suited him perfectly well, for he still entertained certain misgivings with regard to the occultist's motives. As Carstairs had promised, however, he was there to see Crow off that evening, standing thin and gaunt on the drive, with a wraith of ground mist about his ankles as the younger man drove away.

At his flat in London Crow quickly became bored. He did not sleep well that Friday night, nor on Saturday night, and Sunday was one long misery

of boredom and depression, sensations he was seldom if ever given to experience. On two occasions he found himself feeling unaccountably dry and licking his lips, and more than once he wished he had brought a bottle of Carstairs' wine home with him. Almost without conscious volition, about 7.30 on Sunday evening, he began to pack a few things ready for the return journey. It had completely escaped his usually pin-point but now strangely confused memory that he was not supposed to return until Monday morning.

About 10 p.m. he parked his car in the small garage in the grounds of The Barrows, and walked with his suitcase past three other cars parked on the drive. Now, approaching the house, he began to feel a little foolish; for Carstairs was obviously entertaining friends, and of course he would not be expecting him. If the door should prove to be unlocked, however, he might just be able to enter without being heard and without disturbing his employer.

The door was unlocked; Crow entered and went quietly to the library; and there, on a table beside his open notebook, he discovered a bottle of wine and this note:

> Dear Mr Crow—
>
> I have perused your notes and they seem very thorough. I am well pleased with your work so far. I shall be away most of Monday, but expect to see you before I depart. In the event that you should return early, I leave you a small welcome. Sleep well—
>
> J. C.

All of which was very curious. The note almost made it seem that Carstairs had *known* he would return early! But at any rate, the man seemed in a good humour; and it would be boorish of Crow not to thank him for the gift of the bottle. He could at least try, and then perhaps he would not feel so bad about sneaking into the house like a common criminal. The hour was not, after all, unreasonable.

So thinking, Crow took a small glass of wine to fortify himself, then went quietly into the gloomy passages and corridors and made his unlighted way to Carstairs' study. Seeing a crack of feeble electric light from beneath the occultist's door and hearing voices, he paused, reconsidered his action and was on the point of retracing his steps when he heard his name mentioned. Now he froze and all his attention concentrated itself upon the

conversation being carried on in Carstairs' study. He could not catch every word, but -

"The date ordained … Candlemas Eve," Carstairs was saying. "Meanwhile, I … my will on him. He works for me—do you understand?—and so was partly … power from the start. My will, aided … wine, will do the rest. Now, I … decided upon it, and will … no argument. I have said it before and now … again: he *is* the one. Garbett, what has he in the way of vices?"

A thick, guttural voice answered—a voice which Crow was almost certain he knew from somewhere—saying: "None at all, that I … discover. Neither women—not as a vice—nor drugs; though … very occasionally likes a cigarette. He … not gamble … no spendthrift, he—"

"Is pure!" Carstairs' voice again. "But you … worked for the War Department? In … capacity?"

"That is a stone wall, Master … as well try … into … Bank of England! And it… dangerous to press too far."

"Agreed," answered Carstairs. "I want as little as possible to link him with us and this place. Afterwards, he will seem to return … old haunts, friends, interests. Then the gradual breaking away—and nothing … connect he and I. Except… shall be one!"

"And yet, Master," said another voice, which again Crow thought he knew, a voice like a wind-blown reed, "you seem less … completely satisfied …"

After a pause Carstairs' voice came yet again. "He is not, as yet, a subject … hypnotism. On our first … resisted strongly. But that is not necessarily a bad sign. There is one … need to check. I shall attend to that tomorrow, by letter. It is possible, just possible … lied … birth date. In which case … time to find another."

"But … *little* time!" a fourth voice said. "They mass within you. Master, ravenous and eager to migrate—and Candlemas … so close." This voice was thickly glutinous, as Crow had somehow suspected it would be; but Carstairs' voice when it came again had risen a note or two. While it still had that sonorous quality, it also seemed to ring—as in a sort of triumph?

"Aye, they mass, the Charnel Horde—for they know it nears their time! Then—that which remains shall be theirs, and they shall have a new host!" His voice came down a fraction, but still rang clear. "If Crow has lied, I shall deal with him. Then—and his tone took on a sudden, demonic bite, a

sort of crazed amusement, “perhaps you would volunteer, Durrell, for the feasting of the worm? Here, see *how taken they are with you!*”

At that there came a scuffle of feet and the scraping sound of table and chairs sharply moved. A gurgling, glutinous cry rang out, and Crow had barely sufficient time to draw back into a shallow, arched alcove before the study door flew open and a frantic figure staggered out into the corridor, almost toppling a small occasional table which stood there. White-faced, with bulging eyes, a man of medium build hurried past Crow and toward the main door of the house. He stumbled as he went and uttered a low moan, then threw something down which plopped on the fretted carpet.

When the house door slammed after him, Crow made his way breathlessly and on tiptoe back to the library. He noted, in passing, that something small and pink crawled on the floor where Durrell had thrown it. And all the while the house rang with Carstairs’ baying laughter…

IV

It might now reasonably be assumed that Titus Crow, without more ado, would swiftly take his leave of The Barrows and Carstairs for ever; that he would go home to London or even farther afield, return the month’s wages that Carstairs had paid him in advance, revoke the contract he had signed and so put an end to the … whatever it was that his employer planned for him. And perhaps he would have done just that; but already the wine was working in him, that terribly potent and rapidly addictive wine which, along with Carstairs’ sorcerous will, was binding him to this house of nameless evil.

And even sensing his growing dependence on the stuff, having heard it with his own ears from Carstairs’ own lips, still he found himself reaching with trembling hand for that terrible bottle, and pouring another glass for himself in the suddenly morbid and prisonlike library. All sorts of nightmare visions now raced through Crow’s mind as he sat there a-tremble —chaotic visions of immemorial madness, damnable conclusions totalled from a mass of vague and fragmentary evidences and suspicions—but even as his thoughts whirled, so he sipped, until his senses became totally confounded and he slipped into sleep slumped at the table, his head cushioned upon his arm.

And once more he seemed to dream …

This time there were only three of them.

They had come silently, creeping in the night, and as they entered so one of them, probably Carstairs, had switched off the library lights. Now, in wan moonlight, they stood about him and the hour was midnight.

"See," said Carstairs, "my will and the wine combined have sufficed to call him back, as I said they would. He is now bound to The Barrows as by chains. In a way I am disappointed. His will is not what I thought it. Or perhaps I have made the wine too potent."

"Master," said the one called Garbett, his voice thickly glutinous as ever. "It may be my eyes in this poor light, but—"

"Yes?"

"I think he is trembling! And why is he not in his bed?"

Crow felt Garbett's hand, cold and clammy, upon his fevered brow. "See, he trembles!" said the man. "As if in fear of something …"

"Ah!" came the occultist's voice. "Yes, your powers of observation do you credit, friend Garbett, and you are a worthy member of the coven. Yes, even though the wine holds him fast in its grip, still he trembles. Perhaps he has heard something of which it were better he remained in ignorance. Well, that can be arranged. Now help me with him. To leave him here like this would not be a kindness—and prone upon his bed he will offer less resistance."

Crow felt himself lifted up by three pairs of hands, steadied and guided across the floor, undressed, put to bed. He could see dimly, could feel faintly, could hear quite sharply. The last thing he heard was Carstairs' hypnotic voice, telling him to forget … forget. Forget anything he might have overheard this night. For it was all a dream and unimportant, utterly unimportant…

On Monday morning Crow was awakened by Carstairs' voice. The weak January sun was up and the hands on his wrist-watch stood at 9 a.m. "You have slept late, Mr. Crow. Still, no matter … Doubtless you need the rest after a hectic weekend, eh? I am going out and shall not be back before nightfall. Is there anything you wish me to bring back for you? Something to assist you in your work, perhaps?"

"No," Crow answered, "nothing that I can think of. But thanks anyway." He blinked sleep from his eyes and felt the first throb of a dull ache

developing in the front of his skull. “This is unpardonable—my sleeping to this hour. Not that I slept very well…”

“Ah?” Carstairs tut-tutted. “Well, do not concern yourself—nothing is amiss. I am sure that after breakfast you will feel much better. Now you must excuse me. Until tonight, then.” And he turned and strode from the room.

Crow watched him go and lay for a moment thinking, trying to ignore the fuzziness inside his head. There had been another dream, he was sure, but very little of it was clear and fine details utterly escaped him. He remembered coming back to The Barrows early … after that nothing. Finally he got up, and as soon as he saw the half-empty bottle on the table he understood—or believed he understood—what had happened. That damned wine!

Angry with himself at his own stupidity, he went through the morning’s routine and returned to his work on Carstairs’ books. But now, despite the fact that the sun was up and shining with a wintry brightness, it seemed to Crow that the shadows were that much darker in the house and the gloom that much deeper.

The following day, with Carstairs again absent, he explored The Barrows from attic to cellar, but not the cellar itself. He did try the door beneath the stairs, however, but found it locked. Upstairs the house had many rooms, all thick with dust and sparsely furnished, with spots of mould on some of the walls and woodworm in much of the furniture. The place seemed as disused and decayed above as it was below, and Crow’s inspection was mainly perfunctory. Outside Carstairs’ study he paused, however, as a strange and shuddersome feeling took momentary possession of him.

Suddenly he found himself trembling and breaking out in a cold sweat; and it seemed to him that half-remembered voices echoed sepulchrally and ominously in his mind. The feeling lasted for a moment only, but it left Crow weak and full of a vague nausea. Again angry with himself and not a little worried, he tried the study door and found it to be open. Inside—the place was different again from the rest of the house.

Here there was no dust or disorder but a comparatively well-kept room of fair size, where table and chairs stood upon an eastern-styled carpet, with a great desk square and squat beneath a wall hung with six oil paintings in

matching gilt frames. These paintings attracted Crow's eyes and he moved forward the better to see them. Proceeding from right to left, the pictures bore small metallic plaques which gave dates but no names.

The first was of a dark, hawk-faced, turbaned man in desert garb, an Arab by his looks. The dates were 1602-68. The second was also of a Middle-Eastern type, this time in the rich dress of a sheik or prince, and his dates were 1668-1734. The third was dated 1734-90 and was the picture of a statuesque, high-browed negro of forceful features and probably Ethiopian descent; while the fourth was of a stern-faced young man in periwig and smallclothes, dated 1790-1839. The fifth was of a bearded, dark-eyed man in a waistcoat and wearing a monocle—a man of unnatural pallor—dated 1839-88; and the sixth—

The sixth was a picture of Carstairs himself, looking almost exactly as he looked now, dated 1888-1946!

Crow stared at the dates again, wondering what they meant and why they were so perfectly consecutive. Could these men have been the previous leaders of Carstairs' esoteric cult, each with dates which corresponded to the length of his reign? But 1888 … yes, it made sense; for that could certainly *not* be Carstairs' birth date. Why, he would be only fifty-seven years of age! He looked at least fifteen or twenty years older than that; certainly he gave the impression of advanced age, despite his peculiar vitality. And what of that final date, 1946? Was the man projecting his own death? - or was this to be the year of the next investiture?

Then, sweeping his eyes back across the wall to the first picture, that of the hawk-faced Arab, something suddenly clicked into place in Crow's mind. It had to do with the date 1602 … and in another moment he remembered that this was the date scrawled in reddish ink in the margin of the old Atlas. 1602, the date of birth of the supposed antichrist, in a place once known as Chorazin the Damned!

Still, it made very little sense—or did it? There was a vague fuzziness in Crow's mind, a void desperately trying to fill itself, like a mental jigsaw puzzle with so many missing pieces that the picture could not come together. Crow knew that somewhere deep inside he had the answers—and yet they refused to surface.

As he left Carstairs' study he cast one more half-fearful glance at the man's sardonic picture. A pink crawling thing, previously unnoticed,

dropped from the ledge of the frame and fell with a plop to the floor's boukhara rug …

Left almost entirely on his own now, Crow worked steadily through the rest of Tuesday, through Wednesday and Thursday morning; but after a light lunch on Thursday he decided he needed some fresh air. This coincided with his discovering another worm or maggot in the library, and he made a mental note that sooner or later he must speak to Carstairs about the possibility of a health hazard.

Since the day outside was bright, he let himself out of the house and into the gardens, choosing one of the many overgrown paths rather than the wide, gravelly drive. In a very little while all dullness of the mind was dissipated and he found himself drinking gladly and deeply of the cold air. This was something he must do more often, for all work and no play was beginning to make Titus Crow a very dull boy indeed.

He was not sure whether his employer was at home or away; but upon reaching the main gate by a circuitous route he decided that the latter case must apply. Either that or the man had not yet been down to collect the mail. There were several letters in the box, two of which were holding the metal flap partly open. Beginning to feel the chill, Crow carried the letters with him on a winding route back to the house. Out of sheer curiosity he scanned them as he went, noting that the address on one of them was all wrong. It was addressed to a "Mr Castaigne, Solicitor", at The Burrows'. Alongside the postage stamps the envelope had been faintly franked with the name and crest of Somerset House in London.

Somerset House, the central registry for births and deaths? Now what business could Carstairs have with—

And again there swept over Titus Crow that feeling of nausea and faintness. All the cheeriness went out of him in a moment and his hand trembled where it held the suspect envelope. Suddenly his mind was in motion, desperately fighting to remember something, battling with itself against an invisible inner voice which insisted that it did not matter. But he now knew that it did.

Hidden by a clump of bushes which stood between himself and the house, Crow removed the crested envelope from the bundle of letters and slipped it into his inside jacket pocket. Then, sweating profusely if coldly, he delivered the bulk of the letters to the occasional table outside the door

of Carstairs' study. On his way back to the library he saw that the cellar door stood open under the stairs, and he heard someone moving about down below. Pausing, he called down:

"Mr Carstairs, there's mail for you. I've left the letters outside your study." The sounds of activity ceased and finally Carstairs' voice replied:

"Thank you, Mr Crow. I shall be up immediately."

Not waiting. Crow hurried to the library and sat for a while at the table where he worked, wondering what to do and half-astonished at the impulse which had prompted him to steal the other's mail; or rather, to take this one letter. He had early installed an electric kettle in the library with which to make himself coffee, and as his eyes alighted upon the kettle an idea dawned. For it was far too late now for anything else but to let his persuasions carry him all the way. He must now follow his instincts.

Against the possibility of Carstairs' sudden, unannounced entry, he prepared the makings of a jug of 'instant' coffee, an invention of the war years which found a certain favour with him; but having filled the jug to its brim with boiling water, he used the kettle's surplus steam to saturate the envelope's gummed flap until it came cleanly open. With trembling fingers he extracted the letter and placed the envelope carefully back in his pocket. Now he opened the letter in the pages of his notebook, so that to all intents and purposes he would seem to be working as he read it.

The device was unnecessary, since he was not disturbed; but this, written in a neat hand upon the headed stationery of Somerset House, was what he read:

> Dear Mr Castaigne
>
> In respect of your enquiry on behalf of your client, we never answer such by telephone. Nor do we normally divulge information of this nature except to proven relatives or, occasionally, the police. We expect that now that hostilities are at an end, these restrictions may soon be lifted. However, since you have stressed that this is a matter of some urgency, and since, as you say, the person you seek could prove to be beneficiary of a large sum of money, we have made the necessary enquiries.
>
> There were several Thomas Crows born in London in 1912 and one Trevor Crow; but there was no Titus. A Timeus Crow was born in Edinburgh, and a Titus Crew in Devon.
>
> The name Titus Crow is, in fact, quite rare, and the closest we can come to your specifications is the date 1916, when a Titus Crow was indeed born in the city on 2 December. We are sorry if this seems inconclusive …
>
> If you wish any further investigations made, however, we will require some form of evidence, such as testimonials, of the validity of your credentials and motive.
>
> Until then, we remain, etc. …

Feeling a sort of numbness spreading through all his limbs, his entire body and mind, Crow read the letter again—and yet again. Evidence of Carstairs' credentials and motive, indeed!

Very well, whatever it was that was going on, Titus Crow had now received all the warnings he needed. Forewarned is forearmed, they say, and Crow must now properly arm himself—or at least protect himself—as best he could. One thing he would not do was run, not from an as yet undefined fear, an unidentified threat. His interest in the esoteric, the occult, had brought him to The Barrows, and those same interests must now sustain him.

And so, in his way, he declared war. But what were the enemy's weapons, and what was his objective? For the rest of the afternoon Crow did very little of work but sat in thoughtful silence and made his plans …

V

At 4.45 p.m. he went and knocked on Carstairs' door. Carstairs answered but did not invite him in. Instead he came out into the corridor. There, towering cadaverously over Crow and blocking out even more of the gloomy light of the place, he said, "Yes, Mr Crow? What can I do for you?"

"Sir," Crow answered, "I'm well up to schedule on my work and see little problem finishing it in the time allowed. Which prompts me to ask a favour of you. Certain friends of mine are in London tonight, and so—"

"You would like a long weekend, is that it? Well, I see no real problem, Mr. Crow …" But while Carstairs' attitude seemed genuine enough, Crow suspected that he had in fact presented the man with a problem. His request had caught the occultist off guard—surprised and puzzled him—as if Carstairs had never for a moment considered the possibility of Crow's wishing to take extra time off. He tried his best not to show it, however, as he said: "By all means, yes, do go off and see your friends. And perhaps you would do me the honour of accepting a little gift to take with you? A bottle of my wine, perhaps? Good! When will you be going?"

"As soon as possible," Crow answered at once. "If I leave now I'll have all of tomorrow and Saturday to spend with my friends. I may even be able to return early on Sunday, and so make up for lost time."

"No, I wouldn't hear of it," Carstairs held up long, tapering hands. "Besides, I have friends of my own coming to stay this weekend—and this

time I really do not wish to be disturbed." And he looked at Crow pointedly. "Very well, I shall expect to see you Monday morning. Do enjoy your weekend—and I do urge you to take a bottle of my wine with you." He smiled his ghastly smile.

Crow said, "Thank you," and automatically stuck out his hand—which Carstairs ignored or pretended not to see as he turned and passed back into his study …

At 5.20 Crow pulled up at a large hotel on the approaches to Guildford and found a telephone booth. On his first day at The Barrows, Carstairs had given him his ex-directory number, in case he should ever need to contact him at short notice. Now he took out the letter from Somerset House, draped his handkerchief over the mouthpiece of the telephone and called Carstairs' number.

The unmistakable voice of his employer answered almost at once. "Carstairs here. Who is speaking?"

"Ah, Mr. Castaigne," Crow intoned. "Er, you did say Castaigne, didn't you?"

There was a moment's silence, then: "Yes, Mr. Castaigne, that's correct. Is that Somerset House?"

"Indeed, sir, I am calling in respect of your enquiry about a Mr. Crow?"

"Of course, yes. Titus Crow," Carstairs answered. "I was expecting a communication of one sort or another."

"Quite," said Crow. "Well, the name Titus Crow is in fact quite rare, and so was not difficult to trace. We do indeed have one such birth on record, dated 2 December 1912."

"Excellent!" said Carstairs, his delight clearly in evidence.

"However," Crow hastened on, "I must point out that we do not normally react to unsolicited enquiries of this nature and advise you that in future—"

"I quite understand," Carstairs cut him off. "Do not concern yourself, sir, for I doubt that I shall ever trouble you again." And he replaced his telephone, breaking the connection.

And that, thought Crow as he breathed a sigh of relief and put down his own handset, is that. His credentials were now authenticated, his first line of defence properly deployed.

Now there were other things to do …

Back in London, Crow's first thought was to visit a chemist friend he had known and studied with in Edinburgh. Taylor-Ainsworth was the man, whose interests in the more obscure aspects of chemistry had alienated him from both tutors and students alike. Even now, famous and a power in his field, still there were those who considered him more alchemist than chemist proper. Recently returned to London, Ainsworth was delighted to renew an old acquaintance and accepted Crow's invitation to drinks at his flat that night, with one reservation: he must be away early on a matter of business.

Next Crow telephoned Harry Townley, his family doctor. Townley was older than Crow by at least twenty years and was on the point of giving up his practice to take the cloth, but he had always been a friend and confidant; and he, too, in his way was considered unorthodox in his chosen field. Often referred to as a charlatan, Townley held steadfastly to his belief in hypnotism, homeopathy, acupuncture and such as tremendous aids to more orthodox treatments. Later it would be seen that there was merit in much of this, but for now he was considered a crank.

The talents of these two men, as opposed to those of more mundane practitioners, were precisely what Crow needed. They arrived at his flat within minutes of each other, were introduced and then invited to sample—in very small doses—Carstairs' wine. Crow, too, partook, but only the same minute amount as his friends, sufficient to wet the palate but no more. Oh, he felt the need to fill his glass, certainly, but he now had more than enough of incentives to make him refrain.

"Excellent!" was Harry Townley's view.

"Fine stuff," commented Taylor Ainsworth. "Where on earth did you find it, Titus?" He picked up the bottle and peered closely at the label. "Arabic, isn't it?"

"The label is, yes," Crow answered. "It says simply, 'table wine', that much at least I know. So you both believe it to be of good quality, eh?"

They nodded in unison and Townley admitted, "I wouldn't mind a bottle or two in my cellar, young Crow. Can you get any more?"

Crow shook his head. "I really don't think I want to," he said. "It seems I'm already partly addicted to the stuff—and it leaves me with a filthy headache! Oh, and you certainly shouldn't take it if you're driving. No, Harry, I've other stuff here you can drink while we talk. Less potent by far. This bottle is for Taylor."

“For me?” Ainsworth seemed pleasantly surprised. “A gift, do you mean? That’s very decent of you …” Then he saw Crow’s cocked eyebrow. “Or is there a catch in it?”

Crow grinned. “There’s a catch in it, yes. I want an analysis. I want to know if there’s anything in it. Any drugs or such like.”

“I should be able to arrange that OK,” said the other. “But I’ll need a sample.”

“Take the bottle,” said Crow at once, “and do what you like with it afterwards—only get me that analysis. I’ll be in touch next weekend, if that’s all right with you?”

Now Crow pulled the cork from a commoner brand and topped up their glasses. To Townley he said, “Harry, I think I’m in need of a check-up. That’s why I asked you to bring your tools.”

“What, you?” The doctor looked surprised. “Why, you’re fit as a fiddle—you always have been.”

“Yes,” said Crow. “Well, to my knowledge the best fiddles are two hundred years old and stringy! And that’s just how I feel,” and he went on to describe in full his symptoms of sudden nausea, headaches, bouts of dizziness and apparent loss of memory. “Oh, yes,” he finished, “and it might just have been something to do with that wine which both of you find so excellent!”

While Townley prepared to examine him, Ainsworth excused himself and went off to keep his business appointment. Crow let him go but made him promise not to breathe a word of the wine or his request for an analysis to another soul. When he left, Carstairs’ bottle was safely hidden from view in a large inside pocket of his overcoat.

Townley now sounded Crow’s chest and checked his heart, then examined his eyes—the latter at some length—following which he frowned and put down his instruments. Then he seated himself facing Crow and tapped with his fingers on the arms of his chair. The frown stayed on his face as he sipped his wine.

“Well?” Crow finally asked.

“You may well say ’well’, young Crow,” Townley answered. “Come on now, what have you been up to?”

Crow arched his eyebrows. “Up to? Is something wrong with me, then?”

Townley sighed and looked a little annoyed. “Have it your own way, then,” he said. “Yes, there is something wrong with you. Not a great deal,

but enough to cause me some concern. One: there is some sort of drug in your system. Your pulse is far too slow, your blood pressure too high—oh, and there are other symptoms I recognize, including those you told me about. Two: your eyes. Now eyes are rather a specialty of mine, and yours tell me a great deal. At a guess—I would say you've been playing around with hypnosis."

"I most certainly have not!" Crow denied, but his voice faltered on the last word. Suddenly he remembered thinking that Carstairs had a hypnotic personality.

"Then perhaps you've been hypnotized," Townley suggested, "without your knowing it?"

"Is that possible?"

"Certainly." Again the doctor frowned. "What sort of company have you been keeping just lately, Titus?"

"Fishy company indeed, Harry," the other answered. "But you've interested me. Hypnosis and loss of memory, eh? Well, now," and he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Listen, could you possibly de-hypnotize me? Trace the trouble back to its source, as it were?"

"I can try. If you've been under once—well, it's usually far easier the second time. Are you game?"

"Just try me," Crow grimly answered. "There's something I have to get to the bottom of, and if hypnosis is the way why, I'll try anything once!"

An hour later, having had Crow in and out of trance half a dozen times, the good doctor finally shook his head and admitted defeat. "You have been hypnotized, I'm sure of it," he said, "but by someone who knows his business far better than I. Do you remember any of the questions I asked you when you were under?"

Crow shook his head.

"That's normal enough," the other told him. "What's extraordinary is the fact that I can get nothing out of you concerning the events of the last couple of weeks!"

"Oh?" Crow was surprised. "But I'll gladly tell you all about the last few weeks if you like—without hypnosis."

"*All* about them?"

"Of course."

"I doubt it," Townley smiled, "for that's the seat of the trouble. You don't know all about them. What you remember isn't the whole story."

“I see,” Crow slowly answered, and his thoughts went back again to those dim, shadowy dreams of his and to his strange pseudo-memories of vague snatches of echoing conversation. “Well, thank you, Harry,” he finally said. “You’re a good friend and I appreciate your help greatly.”

“Now listen, Titus.” The other’s concern was unfeigned. “If there’s anything else I can do—anything at all—just let me know, and—”

“No, no, there’s nothing.” Crow forced himself to smile into the doctor’s anxious face. “It’s just that I’m into something beyond the normal scope of things, something I have to see through to the end.”

“Oh? Well, it must be a damned funny business that you can't tell me about. Anyway, I’m not the prying type but I do urge you to be careful.”

“It is a funny business, Harry,” Crow nodded, “and I'm only just beginning to see a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. As for my being careful—you may rely upon that!”

Seeing Townley to the door, he had second thoughts. “Harry, do I remember your having a gun, a six-shooter?”

“A .45 revolver, yes. It was my father’s. I have ammunition, too.”

“Would you mind if I borrowed it for a few weeks?”

Townley looked at him very hard, but finally gave a broad grin. “Of course you can,” he said. “I’ll drop it round tomorrow. But there is such a thing as being too careful, you know!”

VI

Following a very poor night’s sleep, the morning of Friday 18 January found Titus Crow coming awake with a start, his throat dry and rough and his eyes gritty and bloodshot. His first thought as he got out of bed was of Carstairs’ wine—and his second was to remember that he had given it to Taylor Ainsworth for analysis. Stumbling into his bathroom and taking a shower, he cursed himself roundly. He should have let the man take only a sample. But then, as sleep receded and reason took over, he finished showering in a more thoughtful if still sullen mood.

No amount of coffee seemed able to improve the inflamed condition of Crow’s throat, and though it was ridiculously early he got out the remainder of last night’s bottle of his own wine. A glass or two eased the problem a little, but within the hour it was back, raw and painful as ever. That was when Harry Townley turned up with his revolver, and seeing Crow’s

distress he examined him and immediately declared the trouble to be psychosomatic.

“What?” said Crow hoarsely, “you mean I’m imagining it? Well, that would take a pretty vivid imagination!”

“No,” said Townley, “I didn’t say you were imagining it. I said it isn’t a physical thing. And therefore there’s no physical cure.”

“Oh, I think there is,” Crow answered. “But last night I gave the bottle away!”

“Indeed?” And Townley’s eyebrows went up. “Withdrawal symptoms, eh?”

“Not of the usual sort, no,” answered Crow. “Harry, have you the time to put me into trance just once more? There’s a certain precaution I’d like to take before I resume the funny business we were talking about last night.”

“Not a bad idea,” said the doctor, “at least where this supposed sore throat of yours is concerned. If it is psychosomatic, I might be able to do something about it. I’ve had a measure of success with cigarette smokers.”

“Fine,” said Crow, “but I want you to do more than just that. If I give you a man's name, can you order me never to allow myself to fall under his influence—never to be hypnotized by him—again?”

“Well, it’s a tall order,” the good doctor admitted, “but I can try.”

Half an hour later when Townley snapped his fingers and Crow came out of trance, his throat was already feeling much better, and by the time he and Townley left his flat the trouble had disappeared altogether. Nor was he ever bothered with it again. He dined with the doctor in the city, then caught a taxi and went on alone to the British Museum.

Through his many previous visits to that august building and establishment he was well acquainted with the Curator of the Rare Books Department, a lean, learned gentleman thirty-five years his senior, sharp-eyed and with a dry and wicked wit. Sedgewick was the man’s name, but Crow invariably called him ‘sir’.

“What, you again?” Sedgewick greeted him when Crow sought him out. “Did no one tell you the war was over? And what code-cracking business are you on this time, eh?”

Crow was surprised. “I hadn't suspected you knew about that,” he said.

“Ah, but I did! Your superiors saw to it that I received orders to assist you in every possible way. You didn’t suppose I just went running all over the place for any old body, did you?”

“This time,” Crow admitted, “I’m here on my own behalf. Does that change things, sir?”

The other smiled. “Not a bit, old chap. Just tell me what you’re after and I’ll see what I can do for you. Are we back to cyphers, codes, and cryptograms again?”

“Nothing so common, I’m afraid,” Crow answered. “Look, this might seem a bit queer, but I’m looking for something on worm worship.”

The other frowned. “Worm worship? Man or beast?”

“I’m sorry?” Crow looked puzzled.

“Worship of the annelid—family, *Lumbriciclac*—or of the man, Worm?”

“The man-worm?”

“Worm with a capital ‘W’,” Sedgewick grinned. “He was a Danish physician, an anatomist. Olaus Worm. Around the turn of the 16th Century, I believe. Had a number of followers. Hence the word “Wormian”, relating to his discoveries.”

“You get more like a dictionary every day!” Crow jokingly complained. But his smile quickly turned to a frown. “Olaus Worm, eh? Could a Latinized version of that be Olaus Wormius, I wonder?”

“What, old Wormius who translated the Greek *Necronomicon*? No, not possible, for he was 13th Century.”

Crow sighed and rubbed his brow. “Sir,” he said, “you’ve thrown me right off the rails. No, I meant worship of the beast—the annelid, if you like—worship of the maggot.”

Now it was Sedgewick’s turn to frown. “The maggot!” he repeated. “Ah, but now you’re talking about a different kettle of worms entirely. A maggot is a grave-worm. Now if that’s the sort of worm you mean … have you tried The *Mysteries of the Worm*?”

Crow gasped. *The Mysteries of the Worm*! He had seen a copy in Carstairs’ library, had even handled it. Old Ludwig Prinn’s *De Vermis Mysteriis*!

Seeing his look, Sedgewick said: “Oh? Have I said something right?”

“Prinn,” Crow’s agitation was obvious. “He was Flemish, wasn’t he?”

“Correct! A sorcerer, alchemist, and necromancer. He was burned in Brussels. He wrote his book in prison shortly before his execution, and the manuscript found its way to Cologne where it was posthumously published.”

“Do you have a copy in English?”

Sedgewick smiled and shook his head. “I believe there is such a copy—circa 1820, the work of one Charles Leggett, who translated it from the German black-letter—but we don’t have it. I can let you see a black-letter, if you like?”

Crow shook his head. “No, it gives me a headache just thinking of it. My knowledge of antique German simply wouldn’t run to it. What about the Latin?”

“We have half of it. Very fragile. You can see but you can’t touch.”

“Can’t touch? Sir—I want to borrow it!”

“Out of the question, old chap. Worth my job.”

“The black-letter, then,” Crow was desperate. “Can I have a good long look at it? Here? Privately?”

The other pursed his lips and thought it over for a moment or two, and finally smiled. “Oh, I dare say so. And I suppose you’d like some paper and a pen, too, eh? Come on, then.”

A few minutes later, seated at a table in a tiny private room, Crow opened the black-letter—and from the start he knew he was in for a bad time, that the task was near hopeless. None the less he struggled on, and two hours later Sedgewick looked in to find him deep in concentration, poring over the decorative but difficult pages. Hearing the master librarian enter, Crow looked up.

“This could be exactly what I'm looking for,” he said. “I think it’s here—in the chapter called *Sarecenic Rituals.*”

“Ah, the Dark Rites of the Saracens, eh?” said Sedgewick. “Well, why didn’t you say so? We have the *Rituals* in a translation!”

“In English?” Crow jumped to his feet.

Sedgewick nodded. “The work is anonymous, I’m afraid—by Clergyman X, or some such, and of course I can’t guarantee its reliability—but if you want it—”

“I do!” said Crow.

Sedgewick’s face grew serious. “Listen, we’re closing up shop soon. If I get it for you—that is if I let you take it with you—I must have your word that you’ll take infinite care of it. I mean, my heart will quite literally be in my mouth until it’s returned.”

“You know you have my word,” Crow answered at once.

Ten minutes later Sedgewick saw him out of the building. Along the way Crow asked him, “Now how do you suppose Prinn, a native of Brussels,

knew so much about the practice of black magic among the Syria-Arabian nomads?"

Sedgewick opened his encyclopaedic mind. "I've read something about that somewhere," he said. "He was a much-travelled man, Prinn, and lived for many years among an order of Syrian wizards in the Jebel el Ansariye. That's where he would have learned his stuff. Disguised as beggars or holy men, he and others of the order would make pilgrimages to the world's most evil places, which were said to be conducive to the study of demonology. I remember one such focal point of evil struck me as singularly unusual, being as it was situated on the shore of Galilee! Old Prinn lived in the ruins there for some time. Indeed, he names it somewhere in his book." Sedgewick frowned. "Now what was the place called …?"

"Chorazin!" said Crow flatly, cold fingers clutching at his heart.

"Yes, that's right," answered the other, favouring Crow with an appraising glance. "You know, sometimes I think you're after my job! Now do look after that pamphlet, won't you?"

That night, through Saturday and all of Sunday, Crow spent his time engrossed in the *Saracenic Rituals* reduced to the early 19th Century English of 'Clergyman X', and though he studied the pamphlet minutely still it remained a disappointment. Indeed, it seemed that he might learn more from the lengthy preface than from the text itself. 'Clergyman X' (whoever he had been) had obviously spent a good deal of time researching Ludwig Prinn, but not so very much on the actual translation.

In the preface the author went into various dissertations on Prinn's origins, his lifestyle, travels, sources and sorceries—referring often and tantalizingly to other chapters in De Vermis *Mysteriis*, such as those on familiars, on the demons of the Cthulhu Myth Cycle, on divination, necromancy, elementals and vampires—but when it came to actually getting a few of Prinn's blasphemies down on paper, here he seemed at a loss. Or perhaps his religious background had deterred him.

Again and again Crow would find himself led on by the writer, on the verge of some horrific revelation, only to be let down by the reluctance of 'X' to divulge Prinn's actual words. As an example, there was the following passage with its interesting extract from Alhazred's *Al Azif*, which in turn gave credit to an even older work by Ibn Schacabao:

> And great Wisdom was in Alhazard, who had seen the Work of the Worm and knew it well. His Words were ever cryptic, but never less than here, where he discusses the Crypts of the Worm-Wizards of olden Irem, and something of their Sorceries:
>
> "The nethermost Caverns," (said he), "are not for the fathoming of Eyes that see; for their Marvels are strange and terrific. Cursed the Ground where dead Thoughts live new and oddly bodied, and evil the Mind that is held by no Head. Wisely did Ibn Schacabao say, that happy is the Town whose Wizards are all Ashes. For it is of old Rumour that the Soul of the Devil—bought hastes not from his charnel Clay, but fats and instructs the very Worm *that* gnaws; till out of corruption horrid Life springs, and the dull Scavengers of Earth wax crafty to vex it and swell monstrous to plague it. Great Holes secretly are digged where Earth's Pores ought to suffice, and Things have learnt to walk that ought to crawl …"
>
> In Syria, with my own Eyes, I Ludwig Prinn saw one Wizard of Years without Number transfer himself to the Person of a younger man, whose Number he had divined; when at the appointed Hour he spoke the Words of the Worm. And this is what I saw …" [Editor's note: Prinn's description of the dissolution of the wizard and the investment of himself into his host is considered too horrific and monstrous to permit of any merely casual or unacquainted perusal – 'X'.]

Crow's frustration upon reading such as this was enormous; but in the end it was this very passage which lent him his first real clue to the mystery, and to Carstairs' motive; though at the time, even had he guessed the whole truth, still he could not have believed it. The clue lay in the references to the wizard knowing the younger man's number—and on re-reading that particular line Crow's mind went back to his first meeting with Carstairs, when the man had so abruptly enquired about his date of birth. Crow had lied, adding four whole years to his span and setting the date at 2 December 1912. Now, for the first time, he considered that date from the numerologists' point of view, in which he was expert.

According to the orthodox system, the date 2 December 1912 would add up thus:

2
12
1
9
1
2
—
= 27 and 2 + 7 = Nine

Or: 27 = Triple Nine.

Nine could be considered as being either the Death Number or the number of great spiritual and mental achievement. And of course the finding would be reinforced by the fact that there were nine letters in Crow's name—if that was the true date of his birth, which it was not.

To use a different system, the fictional date's numbers would add up thus:

2
1
2
1
9
1
2
—
= 18 and 1 + 8 = Nine

Or: 18 = Triple Six.

Triple six! The number of the Beast in Revelations! Crow's head suddenly reeled. Dimly, out of some forgotten corner of his mind, he heard an echoing voice say, "*His numbers are most propitious … propitious … propitious …*" And when he tried to tie that voice down it wriggled free, saying, "*Not worth it … just a dream … unimportant… utterly unimportant…*"

He shook himself, threw down his pen—then snatched it back up. Now Crow glared at the familiar room about him as a man suddenly roused from nightmare. "It is important!" he cried. "Damned important!"

But of course there was no one to hear him.

Later, fortified with coffee and determined to carry on, he used the Hebrew system to discover his number, in which the letters of the alphabet stand for numbers and a name's total equals the total of the man. Since this

system made no use of the 9, he might reasonably expect a different sort of answer. But this was his result:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
A	B	C	D	E	U	O	F
I	K	G	M	H	V	Z	P

1	2	3	4	5	6
Q	R	L	T	N	W
J		S			X
Y					

Titus Crow equals T,4 I,1 T,4 U,6 S,3 C,3 R,2 O,7 W,6. Which is 4 + 1 + 4 + 6 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 7 + 6 = 36. And 3 + 6 = Nine. Or 36, a double 18. The Beast redoubled!

Propitious? In what way? For whom? Certainly not for himself?

For Carstairs?

Slowly, carefully, Titus Crow put down his pen …

VII

To Carstairs, waiting in the shadow of his doorway, it seemed that Crow took an inordinately long time to park his car in the garage, and when he came into view there were several things about him which in other circumstances might cause concern. A semi-dishevelled look to his clothes; a general tiredness in his bearing; an unaccustomed hang to his leonine head and a gritty redness of eye. Carstairs, however, was not at all concerned; on the contrary, he had expected no less.

As for Crow: despite his outward appearance, he was all awareness! The inflammation of his eyes had been induced by a hard rubbing with a mildly irritating but harmless ointment; the tardy condition of his dress and

apparent lack of will were deliberately affected. In short, he was acting, and he was a good actor.

"Mr Crow," said Carstairs as Crow entered the house. "Delighted to have you back." And the other sensed a genuine relief in the occultist's greeting. Yes, he was glad to have him back. "Have you breakfasted?"

"Thank you, yes—on my way here." Crow's voice was strained, hoarse, but this too was affected.

Carstairs smiled, leading the way to the library. At the door he said, "Ah, these long weekends! How they take it out of one, eh? Well, no doubt you enjoyed the break."

As Crow passed into the library, Carstairs remained in the corridor. "I shall look in later," he said, "when perhaps you'll tell me something of the system you've devised for your work—and something of the progress you are making. Until then …" And he quietly closed the door on Crow.

Now the younger man straightened up. He went directly to his work table and smiled sardonically at the bottle of wine, its cork half-pulled, which stood there waiting for him. He pulled the cork, poured a glass, took the bottle to the barred windows and opened one a crack—then stuck the neck of the bottle through the bars and poured the filthy stuff away into the garden. The empty bottle he placed in his alcove bedroom, out of sight.

Then, seating himself and beginning to work, he forced himself to concentrate on the task in hand—the cataloguing of Carstairs' books, as if that were the real reason he was here—and so without a break worked steadily through the morning. About midday, when he was sure that he had done enough to satisfy his employer's supposed curiosity, should that really be necessary, he made himself coffee. Later he would eat, but not for an hour or so yet.

The morning had not been easy. His eyes had kept straying to the library shelf where he knew an edition of Prinn's book stood waiting for his eager attention. But he dared not open the thing while there was a chance that Carstairs might find him with it. He must be careful not to arouse the occultist's suspicions. Also, there was the glass of red wine close to hand, and Crow had found himself tempted. But in removing the symptoms of his supposed 'addiction", Harry Townley had also gone a good deal of the way toward curbing the need itself; so that Crow half-suspected it was his own perverse nature that tempted him once more to taste the stuff, as if in contempt of Carstairs' attempted seduction of his senses.

And the glass was still there, untouched, when half an hour later Carstairs quietly knocked and strode into the room. His first act on entering was to go directly to the windows and draw the shades, before moving to the table and picking up Crow's notes. Saying nothing, he studied them for a moment, and Crow could see that he was mildly surprised. He had not expected Crow to get on quite so well, that much was obvious. Very well, in future he would do less. It made little difference, really, for by now he was certain that the 'work' was very much secondary to Carstairs' real purpose in having him here. If only he could discover what that purpose really was …

"I am very pleased, Mr. Crow," said Carstairs presently. "Extremely so. Even in adverse conditions you appear to function remarkably well."

"Adverse conditions?"

"Come now! It is dim here—drab, lonely and less than comfortable. Surely these are adverse conditions?"

"I work better when left alone," Crow answered. "And my eyes seem to have grown accustomed to meagre light."

Carstairs had meanwhile spotted the glass of wine, and turning his head to scan the room he casually searched for the bottle. He did not seem displeased by Crow's apparent capacity for the stuff.

"Ah …" Crow mumbled. "Your wine. I'm afraid I—"

"Now no apologies, young man," Carstairs held up a hand. "I have more than plenty of wine. Indeed, it gives me pleasure that you seem to enjoy it so. And perhaps it makes up for the otherwise inhospitable conditions, which I am sure are not in accordance with your usual mode of existence. Very well, I leave you to it. I shall be here for the rest of today—I have work in my study—but tomorrow I expect to be away. I shall perhaps see you on Wednesday morning?" And with that he left the library.

Satisfied that he was not going to be disturbed any further, without bothering to open the window shades, Crow took down *De Vermis Mystcriis* from its shelf and was at once dismayed to discover the dark, cracked leather bindings of the German black-letter, almost the duplicate of the book he had looked into in the British Museum. His dismay turned to delight, however, on turning back the heavy cover and finding pasted into the old, outer shell, a comparatively recent work whose title page declared it to be:

THE MYSTERIES OF THE WORM
being
THE COMPLETE BOOK
in sixteen chapters
With many dozens wood engravings;
Representing
THE ORIGINAL WORK
of
LUDWIG PRINN,
after translation
By Charles Leggett,
and including his notes;
this being Number Seven
of a very Limited Edition,
LONDON
1821

Crow immediately took the book through into his alcove room and placed it under his pillow. It would keep until tonight. Then he unpacked a few things, hiding Townley's gun under his mattress near the foot of the bed. Finally, surprised to find he had developed something of an appetite, he decided upon lunch.

But then, as he drew the curtains on the alcove and crossed the room toward the library door, something caught his eye. It was an obscene, pink wriggling shape on the faded carpet where Carstairs had stood. He took it to the window but there, even as he made to toss it into the garden, discovered a second worm crawling on the wainscotting. Now he was filled with revulsion. These were two worms too many!

He disposed of the things, poured the still untouched glass of wine after them and went straight to Carstairs' study. Knocking, he heard dull movements within, and finally the occultist's voice:

"Come in, Mr. Crow."

This surprised him, for until now the room had supposedly been forbidden to him. Nevertheless he opened the door and went in. The gloom inside made shadows of everything, particularly the dark figure seated at the great desk. A thick curtain had been drawn across the single window and only the dim light of a desk-lamp, making a pool of feeble yellow atop

the desk, gave any illumination at all. And now, here in these close quarters, the musty smell of the old house had taken to itself an almost charnel taint which was so heavy as to be overpowering.

"I was resting my eyes, Mr. Crow," came Carstairs' sepulchral rumble. "Resting this weary old body of mine. Ah, what it must be to be young! Is there something?"

"Yes," said Crow firmly. "A peculiar and very morbid thing. I just thought I should report it."

"A peculiar thing? Morbid? To what do you refer?" Carstairs sat up straighter behind his desk.

Crow could not see the man's face, which was in shadow, but he saw him start as he answered, "Worms! A good many of them. I've been finding them all over the house."

The figure in the chair trembled, half-stood, sat down again. "Worms?" There was a badly-feigned tone of surprise in his voice, followed by a short silence in which Crow guessed the other sought for an answer to this riddle. He decided to prompt him:

"I really think you should have it seen to. They must be eating out the very heart of the house."

Now Carstairs sat back and appeared to relax. His chuckle was throaty when he answered. "Ah, no, Mr. Crow—for they are not of the house-eating species. I rather fancy they prefer richer fare. Yes, I too have seen them. They are maggots!"

"Maggots?" Crow could not keep the disgusted note out of his voice, even though he had half-suspected it. "But … is there something dead here?"

"There was," Carstairs answered. "Shortly after you arrived here I found a decomposing rabbit in the cellar. The poor creature had been injured on the road or in a trap and had found a way into my cellar to die. Its remains were full of maggots. I got rid of the carcass and put down chemicals to destroy the maggots. That is why you were forbidden to go into the cellar; the fumes are harmful."

"I see …"

"As for those few maggots you have seen: doubtless some escaped and have found their way through the cracks and crevices of this old house. There is nothing for them here, however, and so they will soon cease to be a problem."

Crow nodded.

"So do not concern yourself."

"No, indeed." And that was that.

Crow did not eat after all. Instead, feeling queasy, he went out into the garden for fresh air. But even out there the atmosphere now seemed tainted. It was as if a pall of gloom hovered over the house and grounds, and that with every passing minute the shadows deepened and the air grew heavy with sinister presences.

Some sixth, psychic sense informed Crow that he walked the strands of an incredibly evil web, and that a great bloated spider waited, half-hidden from view, until the time was just right—or until he took just one wrong step. Now a longing sprang up in him to be out of here and gone from the place, but there was that obstinate streak in his nature which would not permit flight. It was a strange hand that Fate had dealt, where at the moment Carstairs seemed to hold more than his fair share of the aces and Titus Crow held only one trump card.

Even now he did not realize how much depended upon that card, but he felt sure that he would very soon find out.

VIII

Crow did little or no work that afternoon but, affected by a growing feeling of menace—of hidden eyes watching him—searched the library wall to wall and over every square inch of carpeting, wainscotting, curtains and alcove, particularly his bed, for maggots. He did not for one moment believe Carstairs' explanation for the presence of the things, even though logic told him it was a perfectly plausible one. But for all that his search was very thorough and time-consuming, he found nothing.

That night, seated uneasily in the alcove behind drawn curtains, he took out *De Vermis Mysteriis* and opened it to the *Saracenic Ritual*s—only to discover that the greater part of that chapter was missing, the pages cleanly removed with a razor-sharp knife. The opening to the chapter was there, however, and something of its middle. Reading what little remained, Crow picked out three items which he found particularly interesting. One of these fragments concerned that numerology in which he was expert, and here was

an item of occult knowledge written down in terms no one could fail to understand.

> The Names of a man, along with his Number, are all-important. Knowing the first, a Magician knows something of the Man; knowing the Second, he knows his Past, Present, and Future; and he may control the Latter by means of his Sorceries, even unto the Grave and beyond!

Another offered a warning against wizardly generosity:

> Never accept a Gift from a Necromancer, or any Wizard or Familiar. Steal which may be stolen, buy which may be bought, earn it if that be at all possible and if it must be had—but do *not* accept it, neither as a Gift nor as a Legacy …

Both of these seemed to Crow to have a bearing on his relationship with Carstairs; but the last of the three interested and troubled him the most, for he could read in it an even stronger and far more sinister parallel:

> A Wizard will not offer the Hand of friendship to one he would seduce. When a Worm-Wizard refuses his Hand, that is an especially bad Omen. And having once refused his Hand, if he then offers it—that is even worse!

Finally, weary and worried but determined in the end to get to the root of the thing, Crow went to bed. He lay in darkness and tossed and turned for a long time before sleep finally found him; and this was the first time, before sleeping, that he had ever felt the need to turn his key in the lock of the library door.

On Tuesday morning Crow was awakened by the sound of a motorcar's engine. Peeping through half-closed window shades he saw Carstairs leave the house and get into a car which waited on the winding drive. As soon as the car turned about and bore the occultist away, Crow quickly dressed and went to the cellar door under the stairs in the gloomy hall. The door was locked, as he had expected.

Very well, perhaps there was another way in. Carstairs had said that a rabbit had found its way in; and even if that were untrue, still it suggested that there might be such an entry from the grounds of the house. Going into the garden, Crow first of all ensured that he was quite alone, then followed the wall of the house until, at the back, he found overgrown steps leading

down to a basement landing. At the bottom a door had been heavily boarded over, and Crow could see at a glance that it would take a great deal of work to get into the cellar by that route. Nor would it be possible to disguise such a forced entry. To one side of the door, completely opaque with grime, a casement window next offered itself for inspection. This had not been boarded up, but many successive layers of old paint had firmly welded frame and sashes into one. Using a penknife, Crow worked for a little while to gouge the paint free from the joint; but then, thinking to hear an unaccustomed sound, he stopped and hastily returned to the garden. No one was there, but his nerves had suffered and he did not return to his task. That would have to wait upon another day.

Instead he went back indoors, washed, shaved and breakfasted (though really he did not have much of an appetite) and finally climbed the stairs to scan the countryside all around through bleary windows. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he returned to the ground floor and once more ventured along the corridor to Carstairs' study. That door, too, was locked; and now Crow's frustration and jumpiness began to tell on him. Also he suspected that he was missing the bolstering—or deadening—effect of the occultist's wine. And Carstairs had not been remiss in leaving him a fresh bottle of the stuff upon the breakfast table.

Now, fearing that he might weaken, he rushed back to the kitchen and picked up the bottle on the way. Only when he had poured it down the sink, every last drop, did he begin to relax; and only then did he realize how tired he was. He had not slept well; his nerves seemed frayed; at this rate he would never have the strength to solve the mystery, let alone see it through to the end.

At noon, on the point of preparing himself a light meal, he found yet another maggot—this time in the kitchen itself. That was enough. He could not eat here. Not now.

He left the house, drove into Haslemere and dined at an hotel, consumed far too many brandies and returned to The Barrows cheerfully drunk. All the rest of the day he spent sleeping it off—for which sheer waste of time he later cursed himself—and awakened late in the evening with a nagging hangover.

Determined now to get as much rest as possible, he made himself a jug of coffee and finally retired for the night. The coffee did not keep him awake; and once again he had locked the library door.

Wednesday passed quickly and Crow saw Carstairs only twice. He did a minimum of ‘work’ but searched the library shelves for other titles which might hint at his awful employer’s purpose. He found nothing, but such was his fascination with these old books—the pleasure of reading and handling them—that his spirits soon rose to something approaching their previous vitality. And throughout the day he kept up the pretence of increasing dependence on Carstairs’ wine, and he continued to effect a hoarse voice and to redden his eyes by use of the irritating ointment.

On Thursday Carstairs once again left the house, but this time he forgot to lock his study door. By now Crow felt almost entirely returned to his old self, and his nerves were steady as he entered that normally forbidden room. And seeing Carstairs’ almost antique telephone standing on an occasional table close to the desk, he decided upon a little contact with the outside world.

He quickly rang Taylor Ainsworth's number in London. Ainsworth answered, and Crow said: “Taylor, Titus here. Any luck yet with that wine?”

“Ah!” said the other, his voice scratchy with distance. “So you couldn’t wait until the weekend, eh? Well, funny stuff, that wine, with a couple of really weird ingredients. I don’t know what they are or how they work, but they do. They work on human beings like aniseed works on dogs! Damned addictive!”

“Poisonous?”

“Eh? Dear me, no! I shouldn’t think so, not in small amounts. You wouldn’t be talking to me now if they were! Listen, Titus, I’d be willing to pay a decent price if you could—”

“Forget it!” Crow snapped. Then he softened. “Listen, Taylor, you’re damned *lucky* there’s no more of that stuff, believe me. I think it’s a recipe that goes back to the very blackest days of Man’s history—and I’m pretty sure that if you knew those secret ingredients you’d find them pretty ghastly! Thanks anyway, for what you’ve done.” And despite the other’s distant protests he put down the telephone.

Now, gazing once more about that dim and malodorous room, Crow’s eyes fell upon a desk calendar. Each day, including today, had been scored through with a thick black line. The 1st February, however, Candlemas Eve, had been ringed with a double circle.

Candlemas Eve, still eight days away …

Crow frowned. There was something he should remember about that date, something quite apart from its religious connections. Dim memories stirred sluggishly. Candlemas Eve, the date ordained.

Crow started violently. The date ordained? Ordained for what? Where had that idea come from? But the thought had fled, had sunk itself down again into his subconscious mind.

Now he tried the desk drawers. All were locked and there was no sign of a key. Suddenly, coming from nowhere, Crow had the feeling that there were eyes upon him! He whirled, heart beating faster—and came face to face with Carstairs' picture where it hung with the others on the wall. In the dimness of that oppressive room, the eyes in the picture seemed to glare at him piercingly …

After that the day passed uneventfully and fairly quickly. Crow visited the sunken casement window again at the rear of the house and did a little more work on it, scraping away at the old, thick layers of paint, seeming to make very little impression. As for the rest of the time: he rested a good deal and spent an hour or so on Carstairs' books—busying himself with the 'task' he had been set—but no more than that.

About 4.30 p.m. Crow heard a car pull up outside and going to the half-shaded windows he saw Carstairs walking up the drive as the car pulled away. Then, giving his eyes a quick rub and settling himself at his work table, he assumed a harassed pose. Carstairs came immediately to the library, knocked and walked in.

"Ah, Mr. Crow. Hard at it as usual, I see?"

"Not really," Crow hoarsely answered, glancing up from his notebook. "I can't seem to find the energy for it. Or maybe I've gone a bit stale. It will pass."

Carstairs seemed jovial. "Oh, I'm sure it will. Come, Mr. Crow, let's eat. I have an appetite. Will you join me?" Seeing no way to excuse himself, Crow followed Carstairs to the dining-room. Once there, however, he remembered the maggot he had found in the kitchen and could no longer contemplate food under any circumstances.

"I'm really not very hungry," he mumbled.

"Oh?" Carstairs raised an eyebrow. "Then I shall eat later. But I'm sure you wouldn't refuse a glass or two of wine, eh?"

Crow was on the point of doing just that—until he remembered that he could not refuse. He was not supposed to be able to refuse! Carstairs fetched a bottle from the larder, pulled its cork and poured two liberal glasses. “Here’s to you, Mr Crow,” he said. “No—to us!”

And seeing no way out, Crow was obliged to lift his glass and drink …

IX

Nor had Carstairs been satisfied to leave it at that. After the first glass there had been a second, and a third, until Titus Crow’s head was very quickly spinning. Only then was he able to excuse himself, and then not before Carstairs had pressed the remainder of the bottle into his hand, softly telling him to take it with him, to enjoy it before he retired for the night.

He did no such thing but poured it into the garden; and then, reeling as he went, made his way to the bathroom where he drank water in such amounts and so quickly as to make himself violently ill. Then, keeping everything as quiet as possible, he staggered back to the library and locked himself in.

He did not think that a great deal of wine remained in his stomach—precious little of anything else, either—but his personal remedy for any sort of excess had always been coffee. He made and drank an entire jug of it, black, then returned to the bathroom and bathed, afterwards thoroughly dousing himself with cold water. Only then did he feel satisfied that he had done all he could to counteract the effects of Carstairs’ wine.

All of this had taken it out of him, however, so that by 8 p.m. he was once again listless and tired. He decided to make an early night of it, retiring to his alcove with *De Vermis Mysteriis.* Within twenty minutes he was nodding over the book and feeling numb and confused in his mind. The unvomited wine was working on him, however gradually, and his only hope now was that he might sleep it out of his system.

Dazedly returning the heavy book to its shelf, he stumbled back to his bed and collapsed on to it. In that same position, spread-eagled and face down, he fell asleep; and that was how he stayed for the next four hours.

Crow came awake slowly, gradually growing aware that he was being addressed, aware too of an unaccustomed feeling of cold. Then he

remembered what had gone before and his mind began to work a little faster. In the darkness of the alcove he opened his eyes a fraction, peered into the gloom and made out two dim figures standing to one side of his bed. Some instinct told him that there would be more of them on the other side, and only by the greatest effort of will was he able to restrain himself from leaping to his feet.

Now the voice came again, Carstairs' voice, not talking to him this time but to those who stood around his bed. "I was afraid that the wine's effect was weakening—but apparently I was wrong. Well, my friends, you are here tonight to witness an example of my will over the mind and body of Titus Crow. He cannot be allowed to go away this weekend, of course, for the time is too near. I would hate anything to happen to him."

"So would we all, Master," came a voice Crow recognized. "For—"

"For then I would need to make a second choice, eh, Durrell? Indeed, I know why you wish nothing to go amiss. But you presume, Durrell! You are not fit habitation."

"Master, I merely—" the other began to protest.

"Be quiet!" Carstairs hissed. "And watch." Now his words were once more directed at Crow, and his voice grew deep and sonorous.

"Titus Crow, you are dreaming, only dreaming. There is nothing to fear, nothing at all. It is only a dream. Turn over onto your back, Titus Crow."

Crow, wide awake now—his mind suddenly clear and realizing that Harry Townley's counter-hypnotic device was working perfectly—forced himself to slow, languid movement. With eyes half-shuttered, he turned over, relaxed and rested his head on his pillow.

"Good!" Carstairs breathed. "That was good. Now sleep, Titus Crow, sleep and dream."

Now Garbett's voice said: "Apparently all is well, Master."

"Yes, all is well. His Number is confirmed, and he comes more fully under my spell as the time approaches. Now we shall see if we can do a little more than merely command dumb movement. Let us see if we can make him talk. Mr. Crow, can you hear me?"

Crow, mind racing, opened parched lips and gurgled, "Yes, I hear you."

"Good! Now, I want you to remember something. Tomorrow you will come to me and tell me that you have decided to stay here at The Barrows over the weekend. Is that clear?"

Crow nodded.

“You do want to stay, don’t you?”

Again he nodded.

“Tell me you wish it.”

“I want to stay here,” Crow mumbled, “over the weekend.”

“Excellent!” said Carstairs. “There’ll be plenty of wine for you here, Titus Crow, to ease your throat and draw the sting from your eyes.”

Crow lay still, forcing himself to breathe deeply.

“Now I want you to get up, turn back your covers and get into bed,” said Carstairs. “The night air is cold and we do not wish you to catch a chill, do we?”

Crow shook his head, shakily stood up, turned back his blankets and sheets and lay down again, covering himself.

“Completely under your control!” Garbett chuckled, rubbing his hands together. “Master, you are amazing!”

“I have been amazing, as you say, for almost three and a half centuries,” Carstairs replied with some pride. “Study my works well, friend Garbett, and one day you too may aspire to the Priesthood of the Worm!”

On hearing these words so abruptly spoken, Crow could not help but give a start—but so too did the man Durrell, a fraction of a second earlier, so that Crow’s movement went unnoticed. And even as the man on the bed sensed Durrell’s frantic leaping, so he heard him cry out: “*Ugh!* On the floor! I trod on one! The maggots!”

“Fool!” Carstairs hissed. “Idiot!” And to the others, “Get him out of here. Then come back and help me collect them up.”

After that there was a lot of hurried movement and some scrambling about on the floor, but finally Crow was left alone with Carstairs: and then the man administered that curious droning caution which Crow was certain he had heard before.

“It was all a dream, Mr. Crow. Only a dream. There is nothing really you should remember about it, nothing of any importance whatever. But you will come to me tomorrow, won’t you, and tell me that you plan to spend the weekend here? Of course you will!”

And with that Carstairs left, silently striding from the alcove like some animated corpse into the dark old house. But this time he left Crow wide awake, drenched in a cold sweat of terror and with little doubt in his mind but that this had been another attempt of Carstairs’ to subvert him to his will—at which he had obviously had no little success in the recent past!

Eyes staring in the darkness, Crow waited until he heard engines start up and motorcars draw away from the house—waited again until the old place settled down—and when far away a church clock struck one, only then did he get out of bed, putting on lights and slippers, trembling in a chill which had nothing at all in common with that of the house. Then he set about to check the floor of the alcove, the library, to strip and check and reassemble his bed blanket by blanket and sheet by sheet; until at last he was perfectly satisfied that there was no crawling thing in this area he had falsely come to think of as his own place, safe and secure. For the library door was still locked, which meant either that Carstairs had a second key, or—

Now, with Harry Townley's .45 tucked in his dressing-gown pocket, he examined the library again, and this time noticed that which very nearly stood his hair on end. It had to do with a central section of heavy shelving set against an internal wall. For in merely looking at this mighty bookcase, no one would ever suspect that it had a hidden pivot—and yet such must be the case. Certain lesser books where he had left them stacked on the carpet along the frontage of the bookshelves had been moved, swept aside in an arc; and now indeed he could see that a small gap existed between the bottom of this central part and the carpeted floor proper.

Not without a good deal of effort, finally Crow found the trick of it and caused the bookcase to move, revealing a blackness and descending steps which spiralled steeply down into the bowels of the house. At last he had discovered a way into the cellar; but for now he was satisfied simply to close that secret door and make for himself a large jug of coffee, which he drank to its last drop before making another.

And so he sat through the remaining hours of the night, sipping coffee, occasionally trembling in a preternatural chill, and promising himself that above all else, come what may, he would somehow sabotage whatever black plans Carstairs had drawn up for his future …

The weekend was nightmarish.

Crow reported to Carstairs Saturday morning and begged to be allowed to stay at The Barrows over the weekend (which, it later occurred to him in the fullness of his senses, whether *he himself* willed it or not, was exactly what he had been instructed to do!) to which suggestion, of course, the master of the house readily agreed. And after that things rapidly degenerated.

Carstairs was there for every meal, and whether Crow ate or not his host invariably plied him with wine; and invariably, following a routine which now became a hideous and debilitating ritual, he would hurry from the dining-room to the bathroom, there to empty his stomach disgustingly of its stultifying contents. And all of this time he must keep up the pretence of falling more and more willingly under Carstairs' spell, though in all truth this was the least of it. For by Sunday night his eyes were inflamed through no device of his own, his throat sore with the wine and bathroom ritual, and his voice correspondingly hoarse.

He did none of Carstairs' 'work' during those hellish days, but at every opportunity pored over the man's books in the frustrated hope that he might yet find something to throw more light on the occultist's current activities. And all through the nights he lay abed, desperately fighting the drugs which dulled his mind and movements, listening to cellar-spawned chantings and howlings until with everything else he could very easily imagine himself the inhabitant of bedlam.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday passed in like fashion—though he did manage to get some food into his system, and to avoid excessive contact with Carstairs' wine—until, on Wednesday evening over dinner, the occultist offered him the break he so desperately longed for. Mercifully, on this occasion, the customary bottle of wine had been more than half-empty at the beginning of the meal; and Crow, seizing the opportunity to pour, had given Carstairs the lion's share, leaving very little for himself; and this without attracting the attention of the gaunt master of the house, whose thoughts seemed elsewhere. So that Crow felt relieved in the knowledge that he would not have to concern himself yet again with the morbid bathroom ritual.

At length, gathering his thoughts, Carstairs said: "Mr. Crow, I shall be away tomorrow morning, probably before you are up and about. I will return about mid-afternoon. I hesitate to leave you alone here, however, for to be perfectly frank you do not seem at all well."

"Oh?" Crow hoarsely mumbled. "I feel well enough."

"You do not look it. Perhaps you are tasking yourself too hard." His eyes bored into Crow's along the length of the great table, and his voice assumed its resonant, hypnotic timbre. "I think you should rest tomorrow, Mr. Crow. Rest and recuperate. Lie late abed. Sleep and grow strong."

At this Crow deliberately affected a fluttering of his eyelids, nodding and starting where he sat, like an old man who has difficulty staying awake. Carstairs laughed.

"Why!" he exclaimed, his voice assuming a more casual tone. "Do you see how right I am? You were almost asleep at the table! Yes, that's what you require, young man: a little holiday from work tomorrow. And Friday should see you back to normal, eh?"

Crow dully nodded, affecting disinterest—but his mind raced. Whatever was coming was close now. He could feel it like a hot wind blowing from hell, could almost smell the sulphur from the fires that burned behind Carstairs' eyes …

Amazingly, Crow slept well and was awake early. He remained in bed until he heard a car pull up to the house, but even then some instinct kept him under his covers. Seconds later Carstairs parted the alcove's curtains and silently entered; and at the last moment hearing his tread, with no second to spare, Crow fell back upon his pillow and feigned sleep.

"That's right, Titus Crow, sleep," Carstairs softly intoned. "Sleep deep and dreamlessly—for soon your head shall know no dreams, no thoughts but mine! Sleep, Titus Crow, sleep …" A moment later and the rustling of the curtains signalled his leaving; but still Crow waited until he heard the receding crunch of the car's tyres on the gravel of the drive.

After that he was up in a moment and quickly dressed. Then: out of the house and around the grounds, and upstairs to spy out the land all around. Finally, satisfied that he was truly alone, he returned to the library, opened the secret bookcase door and descended to the Stygian cellar. The narrow stone steps turned one full circle to leave him on a landing set into an arched alcove in the cellar wall, from which two more paces sufficed to carry him into the cellar proper. Finding a switch, he put on subdued lighting—and at last saw what sort of wizard's lair the place really was!

Now something of Crow's own extensive occult knowledge came to the fore as he moved carefully about the cellar and examined its contents; something of that, and of his more recent readings in Carstairs' library. There were devices here from the very blackest days of Man's mystical origins, and Titus Crow shuddered as he read meaning into many of the things he saw.

The floor of the cellar had been cleared toward its centre, and there he found the double, interlocking circles of the Persian Mages, freshly daubed in red paint. In one circle he saw a white-painted ascending node, while in the other a black node descended. A cryptographic script, immediately known to him as the blasphemous *Nyhargo Code*, patterned the brick wall in green and blue chalks, its huge Arabic symbols seeming to leer where they writhed in obscene dedication. The three remaining walls were draped with tapestries so worn as to be threadbare, which could only be centuries old, depicting the rites of immemorial necromancers and wizards long passed into the dark pages of history; wizards robed, Crow noted, in the forbidden pagan cassocks of ancient *deserta Arabia*, lending them an almost holy aspect.

In a cobwebbed corner he found scrawled pentacles and zodiacal signs; and hanging upon hooks robes similar to those in the tapestries, embroidered with symbols from the *Lemegeton*, such as the Double Seal of Solomon. Small jars contained hemlock, henbane, mandrake, Indian hemp and a substance Crow took to be opium—and again he was given to shudder and to wonder at the constituents of Carstairs' wine …

Finally, having seen enough, he retraced his steps to the library and from there went straight to Carstairs' study. Twice before he had found this door unlocked, and now for the third time he discovered his luck to be holding. This was hardly unexpected, however; knowing Crow would sleep the morning through, the magician had simply omitted to take his customary precautions. And inside the room … another piece of luck! The keys to the desk dangled from a drawer keyhole.

With trembling hands Crow opened the drawers, hardly daring to disturb their contents; but in the desk's bottom left-hand drawer, at last he was rewarded to find that which he most desired to see. There could be no mistaking it: the cleanly sliced margins, the woodcut illustrations, the precise early 19th Century prose of one Charles Leggett, translator of Ludwig Prinn. This was the missing section from Leggett's book: these were the *Saracenic Rituals*, the Mysteries of the Worm!

Closing the single window's shades, Crow switched on the desk lamp and proceeded to read, and as he read so time seemed to suspend itself in the terrible lore which was now revealed. Disbelievingly, with eyes that opened wider and wider, Crow read on; and as he turned the pages, so the words seemed to leap from them to his astonished eyes. An hour sped by,

two, and Crow would periodically come out of his trance long enough to glance at his watch, or perhaps pass tongue over parched lips, before continuing. For it was all here, all of it—and finally everything began to click into place.

Then … it was as if a floodgate had opened, releasing pent-up, forbidden memories to swirl in the maelstrom of Crow's mind. He suddenly *remembered* those hypnotically-erased night visits of Carstairs", the conversations he had been willed to forget; and rapidly these pieces of the puzzle slotted themselves together, forming a picture of centuries-old nightmare and horror out of time. He *understood* the mystery of the paintings with their consecutive dates, and he knew Carstairs' meaning when the man had hinted at a longevity dating back almost three and a half centuries. And at last, in blinding clarity, he could see the part that the wizard had planned for him in his lust for sorcerous survival.

For Crow was to be the receptacle, the host body, youthful haven of flesh for an ancient black phoenix risen again from necromantic ashes! As for Crow himself, the *Identity*, Titus Crow: That was to be cast out—exorcized and sent to hell—*replaced by the mind and will of Carstairs, a monster born of the blackest magicks in midnight ruins by the shore of Galilee in the year 1602 …!*

Moreover, he knew when the deed was to be done. It was there, staring at him, ringed in ink on Carstairs' desk calendar: the 1st day of February, 1946.

Candlemas Eve, "the day ordained."

Tomorrow night!

X

That night, though he had never been much of a believer, Titus Crow said his prayers. He did manage to sleep—however fitfully and with countless startings awake, at every tiniest groan and creak of the old place—and in the morning looked just as haggard as this last week had determined he should look. Which was just as well, for as the time approached Carstairs would hardly let him out of his sight.

On four separate occasions that morning, the man came to visit him in the library, eyeing him avidly, like a great and grotesque praying mantis. And even knowing Carstairs' purpose with him—because he knew that

purpose—Crow must keep up his pretence of going to the slaughter like a lamb, and not the young lion his looks normally suggested.

Lunch came and went, when Crow—mainly by deft sleight of hand—once more cut his wine intake to a minimum; and at 6.00 p.m. he negotiated the evening repast with similar skill and success. And through all of this it was plain to him that a morbid excitement was building in Carstairs, an agitation of spirit the man could barely contain.

At 7.30—not long after Crow had finished off an entire jug of coffee and as he sat in silence by the light of one dim lamp, memorizing tonight's monstrous rite from what he had read of it in the *Saracenic Rituals*—Carstairs came and knocked upon the library door, walking in as usual before Crow could issue the customary invitation. No need now for Crow to feign haggardness or the weary slump of his shoulders, for the agonizingly slow buildup to the night's play had itself taken care of these particulars.

"Mr. Crow," said Carstairs in unusually unctuous tones, "I may require a little assistance tonight…"

"Assistance?" Crow peered at the other through red-rimmed eyes. "My assistance?"

"If you have no objection. I have some work to do in the cellar, which may well keep me until the middle of the night. I do not like to keep you from your bed, of course, but in the event I should call for you—' his voice stepped slyly down the register, "you will answer, won't you?"

"Of course," Crow hoarsely answered, his eyes now fixed on the burning orbs of the occultist.

"You will come, when I call?" Carstairs now droned, driving the message home. "No matter how late the hour? You will awaken and follow me? You will come to me in the night, when I call?"

"Yes," Crow mumbled.

"Say it, Titus Crow. Tell me what you will do, when I call."

"I shall come to you," Crow obediently answered. "I will come to you when you call me."

"Good!" said Carstairs, his face ghastly as a skull. "Now rest, Titus Crow. Sit here and rest—and wait for my call. Wait for my call …" Silently he turned and strode from the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

Crow got up, waited a moment, switched off the one bulb he had allowed to burn. In his alcove bedroom he drew the curtains and put on the light, then quickly changed into his dressing—gown. He took Harry

Townley's .45 revolver out from under his mattress, loaded it and tucked it out of sight in the large pocket of his robe. Now he opened the curtains some twelve inches and brushed through them into the library proper, pacing the floor along the pale path of light from the alcove.

To and fro he paced, tension mounting, and more than once he considered flight; even now, close as he was to those dark mysteries which at once attracted and repelled him. The very grit of his makeup would not permit it, however, for his emotions now were running more to anger than the terror he had expected. He was to be, to *have* been, this monster Carstairs' victim! How now, knowing what the outcome would be—praying that it *would be* as he foresaw it—could he possibly turn away? No, flight was out of the question; Carstairs would find a substitute: the terror would continue. Even if Crow were to go, who could say what revenge might or might not fly hot on his heels?

At 9.30 cars pulled up at the house, quiet as hearses and more of them than at any other time, and through a crack in his shades Crow watched shadowy figures enter the house. For a little while then there were faint, subdued murmurings and creakings; all of which Crow heard with ears which strained in the library's darkness, fine-tuned to catch the merest whisper. A little later, when it seemed to him that the noises had descended beneath the house, he put out the alcove light and sat in unmitigated darkness in the chair where Carstairs had left him. And all about him the night grew heavy, until it weighed like lead upon his head and shoulders.

As the minutes passed he found his hand returning again and again to the pocket where Townley's revolver lay comfortably heavy upon his thigh, and every so often he would be obliged to still the nervous trembling of his limbs. Somewhere in the distance a great clock chimed the hour of eleven, and as at a signal Crow heard the first sussurations of a low chanting from beneath his feet. A cold sweat immediately stood out upon his brow, which he dabbed away with a trembling handkerchief.

The Ritual of the Worm had commenced!

Angrily Crow fought for control of himself … for he knew what was coming! He cursed himself for a fool—for several fools—as the minutes ticked by and the unholy chanting took on rhythm and volume. He stood up, sat down, dabbed at his chill brow, fingered his revolver … and started at the sudden chiming of the half hour.

Now, in an instant, the house seemed full of icy air, the temperature fell to zero! Crow breathed the black, frigid atmosphere of the place and felt the tiny hairs crackling in his nostrils. He smelled sharp fumes—the unmistakable reek of burning henbane and opium—and sat rigid in his chair as the chanting from the cellar rose yet again, in a sort of frenzy now, throbbing and echoing as with the acoustics of some great cathedral.

The time must surely approach midnight, but Crow no longer dared glance at his watch.

Whatever it had been, in another moment his terror passed; he was his own man once more. He sighed raggedly and forced himself to relax, knowing that if he did not, then that emotional exhaustion must soon sap his strength. Surely the time—

—Had come!

The chanting told him: the way it swelled, receded and took on a new meter. For now it was his own name he heard called in the night, just as he had been told he would hear it.

Seated bolt upright in his chair, Crow saw the bookshelf door swing open, saw Carstairs framed in the faintly luminous portal, a loose-fitting cassock belted about his narrow middle. Tall and gaunt, more cadaverous than ever, the occultist beckoned.

“Come, Titus Crow, for the hour is at hand. Rise up and come with me, and learn the great and terrible mysteries of the worm!”

Crow rose and followed him, down the winding steps, through reek of henbane and opium and into the now luridly illumined cellar. Braziers stood at the four corners, glowing red where heated metal trays sent aloft spirals of burned incense, herbs and opiates; and round the central space a dozen robed and hooded acolytes stood, their heads bowed and facing inwards, toward the painted, interlocking circles. Twelve of them, thirteen including Carstairs, a full coven.

Carstairs led Crow through the coven’s ring and pointed to the circle with the white-painted ascending node. “Stand there, Titus Crow,” he commanded. “And have no fear.”

Doing as he was instructed, Crow was glad for the cellar’s flickering lighting and its fume-heavy atmosphere, which made faces ruddy and mobile and his trembling barely noticeable. And now he stood there, his feet in the mouth of the ascending node, as Carstairs took up his own position in the adjoining circle. Between them, in the ‘eye’ where the

circles interlocked, a large hourglass trickled black sand from one almost empty globe into another which was very nearly full.

Watching the hourglass and seeing that the sands had nearly run out, now Carstairs threw back his cowl and commanded: “Look at me, Titus Crow, and heed the Wisdom of the Worm!” Crow stared at the man's eyes, at his face and cassocked body.

The chanting of the acolytes grew loud once more, but their massed voice no longer formed Crow’s name. Now they called on the Eater of Men himself, the loathsome master of this loathsome ritual:

“Wamas, Wormius, Vermi, WORM!

“Wamas, Wormius, Vermi, WORM!

“Wamas, Wormius, Vermi”

And the sand in the hourglass ran out!

“*Worm!*” Carstairs cried as the others fell silent. “Worm, I *command thee —come out!*”

Unable, not daring to turn his eyes away from the man, Crow’s lips drew back in a snarl of sheer horror at the transition which now began to take place. For as Carstairs convulsed in a dreadful agony, and while his eyes stood out in his head as if he were splashed with molten metal, still the man’s mouth fell open to issue a great baying laugh.

And out of that mouth—out from his ears, his nostrils, even the hair of his head—there now appeared a writhing pink flood of maggots, grave-worms erupting from his every orifice as he writhed and jerked in his hellish ecstasy!

“Now, Titus Crow, now!” cried Carstairs, his voice a glutinous gabble as he continued to spew maggots. “Take my hand!” And he held out a trembling, quaking mass of crawling horror.

“No!” said Titus Crow. “No, I will not!”

Carstairs gurgled, gasped, cried, “What?” His cassock billowed with hideous movement. “Give me your hand—I *command it!*”

“Do your worst, wizard,” Crow yelled back through gritted teeth.

“But… I have your Number! You *must* obey!”

“Not my Number, wizard,” said Crow, shaking his head—and at once the acolyte circle began to cower back, their sudden gasps of terror filling the cellar.

“You lied!” Carstairs gurgled, seeming to shrink into himself. “You … *cheated!* No matter—a small thing.” In the air he shaped a figure with a

forefinger. “Worm, he is yours. I command you—*take him!*”

Now he pointed at Crow, and now the tomb-horde at his feet rolled like a flood across the floor—and drew back from Crow’s circle as from a ring of fire. “Go on!” Carstairs shrieked, crumbling into himself, his head wobbling madly, his cheeks in tatters from internal fretting. “Who is he? What does he know? I command you!”

“I know many things,” said Crow. “They do not want me—they dare not touch me. And I will tell you why: I was born not in 1912 but in 1916—on 2 December of that year. Your ritual was based on the wrong date, Mr. Carstairs!”

The 2nd of December 1916! A concerted gasp went up from the wavering acolytes. “*A Master!*” Crow heard the whisper. “A twenty-two!”

“No!” Carstairs fell to his knees. “*No!*”

He crumpled, crawled to the rim of his circle, beckoned with a half-skeletal hand. “Durrell, to me!” His voice was the rasp and rustle of blown leaves.

“Not me!” shrieked Durrell, flinging off his cassock and rushing for the cellar steps. “Not me!” Wildly he clambered from sight—and eleven like him hot on his heels.

“*No!*” Carstairs gurgled once more.

Crow stared at him, still unable to avert his eyes. He saw his features melt and flow, changing through a series of identities and firming in the final—the first!—dark Arab visage of his origin. Then he fell on his side, turned that ravaged, sorcerer’s face up to Crow. His eyes fell in and maggots seethed in the red orbits. The horde turned back, washed over him. In a moment nothing remained but bone and shreds of gristle, tossed and eddied on a ravenous tide.

Crow reeled from the cellar, his flesh crawling, his mind tottering on the brink. Only his Number saved him, the 22 of the Master Magician. And as he fumbled up the stone steps and through that empty, gibbering house, so he whispered words half-forgotten, which seemed to come to him from nowhere:

“For it is of old renown that the soul of the devil-bought hastes not from his charnel clay, but fats and instructs the very worm that gnaws; till out of corruption horrid life springs …”

Later, in his right mind but changed for ever, Titus Crow drove away from The Barrows into the frosty night. No longer purposeless, he knew the course his life must now take. Along the gravel drive to the gates, a pinkish horde lay rimed in white death, frozen where they crawled. Crow barely noticed them.

The tyres of his car paid them no heed whatever.

BENEATH THE MOORS

I: Discoveries in Convalescence

[*From the Notebooks of Professor Ewart Masters*]

Following the car accident that nearly killed me, causing what seemed at first rather severe brain damage and leaving me almost completely incapacitated for four months, I decided to spend my convalescence in a return to the interests of earlier years; to take up once more my studies of the ancient things of the world, the civilizations and cities of earth's youth. The decision to do no actual work was taken as a necessity. One cannot lecture when at any second his memory is liable to fail, his very lucidity depart to leave him a mazed and mumbling wreck.

That was the early condition in which my accident had left me; barely capable of concentrating for more than five minutes at a stretch; prone to lapsing at the drop of a hat into shady worlds filled with half-formed visions of dimly remembered scenes and incomprehensible snatches of unrecognized conversations. Shady worlds which were, in effect, spontaneous daydreams, leftovers from my days of total unconsciousness and my secondary phase of semi-amnesia; guaranteed, if ever they should occur in public, to make Professor Ewart Masters a figure of ridicule. In such a condition lecturing was out, as was for that matter anything requiring more than a minimum of concentration.

But I could read and even study, so long as I rested myself as soon as I felt a dizzy spell coming on. And so, when finally I left the London hospital —a move allowed me wholly on my assurance that I *would* rest, that I would not yet attempt to work—it was to catch the first north-bound train out of King's Cross and return to my native Harden on the north-east coast; to the home of my bachelor nephew, Jason Masters, where I might resume the restful studies of my youth.

Restful? I could hardly have been more wrong!

Jason had left nothing to chance, laying in a batch of the latest archaeological journals and papers, a copy of Walmsley's *Notes on Deciphering Codes, Cryptograms and Ancient Inscriptions,* a complete report on the newly opened Mediterranean and Ahaggar digs, and two new illustrated paperbacks taking a refreshing look at the old 'forgotten civilizations' theme. I suppose he followed the principle that the more

reading I did the less tempted I would be towards more strenuous exertions; but the truth of the matter was I had no intention of working. I had been pushing myself for far too long, with never a break in eight years, and doubtless it was the way I had knocked myself about that was to blame for my car accident. The fault was my own; I had been simply too tired to drive. No, relaxation and quiet were for me; no more long hours on the road, no more road-maps to consult, no more lengthy lectures in drafty, poorly lit town halls, and no more sleepless nights worrying over tomorrow's programme; not for quite a long time at any rate.

Yet within a fortnight I was bored to tears, even though the uselessness of attempting anything more ambitious had been brought home to me time and time again. On no less than five occasions I had suffered trauma-like lapses while sitting at my desk with various papers, and once, while out stretching my legs with Jason, my mind had completely blanked and my nephew had had to lead me home while I mumbled to some unseen companion of my childhood.

Over a further period of some six weeks, however, my 'funny turns' slowly petered out and I began to get about more on my own. Jason was delighted with my progress and in the eighth week arranged a trip on which he accompanied me to Radcar Museum, to have a look at some of the newer acquisitions of the antiquities section. The idea of the trip sprang from the interest I had shown in an article in one of the archaeological magazines Jason had got in for me. It seemed that the museum had in its 'Wonders of Ancient Britain' showcases an artefact older than any other known item of British historical interest. Carbon dating and the Wendy-Smith Test had placed the thing—a miniature sculpture of some reptilian 'god'—as being as much as twelve thousand years old; yet photographs in the magazine showed its features to be as clearly defined as if cut only yesterday. And there was something else about it, a suggestion of latent … existence … which somehow disturbed me strangely.

From the moment I laid eyes on the actual figurine itself, resting behind glass in its museum showcase, I was lost. Oh, my studies had been restful enough until then, until the advent of this tiny bit of unknown prehistory. But now …?

Suddenly I had a purpose. It seems strange, I know, but I found myself so inexplicably fascinated by the thing that I became almost grateful for the accident which had led me to its discovery, and as soon as I got back to

Harden I set to work sorting out all the information I could find on it—which eventually came to quite a bit…

Yes, now that I had something to do, something to look for, my health seemed to pick up amazingly, and as the weeks passed my lapses into that strange half-world grew less and less frequent until they ceased almost completely. It seemed the doctors had been quite wrong, work was doing me no harm at all. And, as I have said, I surprised myself at the amount of information I was eventually able to turn up.

Not that I had it all immediately to hand, on the contrary, but after some digging around—a peek or two at Wendy-Smith's *On Ancient Civilizations*, a careful perusal of the 'spoof' death-notes of Professor Gordon Walmsley of Goole (the author of one of those previously mentioned books procured for me by my nephew), a thoughtful examination of the 'message' of the translated but still baffling Kith Characters, and, finally, a slow scrutiny of the known and charted subterranean streams and rivers of the Yorkshire Moors—I was satisfied that I had garnered as much information on the subject as was available without going to a great deal more trouble.

The subject? Well, for me, fascinating though it had been from the start, the figurine itself was only a beginning, a clue, a pointer to … well, to something I did not quite understand myself. I only knew I had the feeling that I was on the first step of an amazing archaeological and anthropological staircase, and that at the top there awaited—?

My interest in speleological charts sprang from the fact that the green lizard-like figurine had been found in a stream where it appeared to have been washed from some underground region through a resurgence at Sarby-on-the-Moor. This, plus a mention in Walmsley's death-notes of a mythical city named Lh-yib (the location of which the professor had supposedly traced to a well-known but completely bleak and barren area of the moors), intrigued me tremendously. I saw a connection that to me was undeniable. After all, the fact that the surface of the moors at the area mentioned by Walmsley was barren, completely devoid of any prehistoric remains other than the normal fossils one might expect to find, did not prove conclusively that such a city had never existed. Why, with the passage of Lord-only-knows how many centuries since Lh-yib stood, *if* it ever stood, the Earth's natural convulsions—earthquakes, tremors, erosion, floods and all the other planet—rending forces of time and nature—could easily have obliterated even the most fragmentary trace of the city! But in that case, why had the

figurine not suffered to a like degree from these deteriorative forces? Had it been cached away somewhere underground to be washed out all these centuries later as clean and new as when first sculpted? This seemed to me the only likely explanation; for that a city should crumble to dust while a mere idol, small and quite susceptible to all Earth's disintegrative processes, remained intact and unaffected down the aeons without some sort of protection was simply not reasonable.

From then on I spent a lot of time in Harden's adequate library, and there, over the next week or two, I became a firm friend of the quite knowledgeable lady librarian Miss Samways; who helped me considerably in tracking down numerous books, even going so far as to have a number sent in from other branches. My purpose primarily was to try to trace the reptilian 'god' itself, to see if I could find any reference to it, or its worship, in the translated writings of the world's great pre-dawn civilizations. To this and other ends I scanned or requested information on many a book half-remembered from my earlier years, many of them on archaeological subjects—the classical digs of Babylonia, Turkey, Pompeii, Chichen-Itza, Milcabamba and Knossos—and numerous others of far more doubtful authenticity; but nowhere, not even in such comprehensive anthropological texts as *The Golden Bough,* could I find mention of a creature or deity of passing similarity to the green figurine.

It was difficult to see how it fitted in, but I soon became so desperate for a clue that I even thought to briefly consider the Melanesian belief of a time 'in the beginning' when mythical beings dwelt on Earth—beings that evolved into men—in particular the crocodile god, Nuga. Then there was the mythology of the Shibiuk peoples of the Upper Nile regions of the Sudan. In these legends crocodile-girls came down from the moon to marry men, and the crocodile later became regarded as the patron of birth and—amazingly enough—protector of babies! Still in Africa, the Malagasy clans believe that the dead return (after growing tails in their graves) in the form of crocodiles; and there are numerous tales of witches and witch-doctors changing into crocodiles through their practising of Black Magic rites. Nor could I completely ignore the crocodile-headed 'god' of Crocodilopolis in ancient Egypt, Sobek, who lolled—jewel-adorned and with his teeth gold-plated—in the sacred pools of his temple. But in more sober frame of mind I had to admit to myself that none of these could be the creature or deity for which I searched.

Despairingly I turned to more truly zoological material in the hope that I might at least find the animal in whose likeness the statuette had been sculpted. I pored over Banfort's *The Saurian Age*, Nessiter's *Dragons of Myth and Legend*, McGilchrist's *Notes on 'Nessie': the Secrets of Loch Ness Revealed!*, and all and any other volumes which I thought might prove valid to my search. It was a stone wall all the way, and more than once I considered giving up an apparently hopeless task.

But then I turned again to Walmsley's 'spoof' notes—those writings published after his inexplicable death—in the hope that somewhere he might have mentioned something of use to me; something perhaps to reinforce his theory of a prehistoric city on the moors…

How I had missed it before I cannot say, but sure enough there was in his notes a lead of sorts. Quite simply Walmsley had stated that the people of his alleged city were 'fancifully described on the *Brick Cylinders of Kadatheron…*'

Just where he had acquired this information is difficult to say (Walmsley had died before Angstrom's team smuggled their pirated treasures of time out of Arabia), but certainly such cylinders as the professor had mentioned were in existence; indeed, Walmsley's own book on the translation of ancient languages had been used extensively in the deciphering of the inscriptions upon those relics of the dead past.

From the library I put through a call to the British Museum in London, requesting a brief reading of the translation. At first the gentleman on the other end of the line was a bit short with me—understandably, I suppose—but when I introduced myself as being Ewart Masters he brought the curator's assistant, one Mr. Fleetly, to the telephone and I got my reading.

There was not a great deal to it in all; I had asked only for the portion, if such existed, containing the description of an ancient people. Mr Fleetly had snorted in answer to my request before telling me:

"People, sir? Things, more like! As wildly fanciful as anything the Greeks ever wrote …" And after I had heard the translation I found myself agreeing with him, but more intrigued than ever:

> … and the Beings of lb are in Hue as green as the Lake of lb and the Mists that rise over the Lake: and their Eyes do bulge outward and their Lips do pout and are as Wattles; and their Ears are curiously formed; and they are without Voices, yet unheard they do speak! … Lo, they came down from the Moon one Night in a Mist; lo, they and the Lake and lb; and there did they worship Bokrug, the great Water-Lizard, and did dance most horribly to the full-waxed Moon …

So: that then was the description of the people—or rather the ‘beings’—of lb as inscribed on the—*Brick Cylinders of Kadatheron.* But those cylinders (the seven so far discovered at least) had come out of the east, while Walmsley's city had supposedly stood somewhere on the Yorkshire Moors!

Most puzzling, all of it, but rewarding insofar as I had at last apparently placed my figurine: which, or so it seemed, had been godhead to a world-wide cult!—though how that could possibly have been I was unable to even guess.

Well, one thing often leads to another, and with this in mind I spent a few more days trying to find other references, this time in connection with lb. But now it seemed that the more I searched the less I turned up. Apart from one mention, again supplied by the British Museum (this time from an ancient translation of doubtful literary origin—*The Ilarnek Papyri*—to the effect that lb’s inhabitants had been wiped out *en masse* by men from another ancient city, Sarnath, and that later a terrible doom had been visited upon Sarnath), there was nothing.

The time had arrived, it seemed, when I should turn my attention to other things …

II: Episode at Bleakstone

[*From the Notebooks of Professor Ewart Masters*]

Apparently then, I had run the thing to earth; there remained nothing to be discovered of the mystery. Oh, true, the mystery itself was as strange and fascinating as ever, but a means to any sort of solution seemed beyond my capabilities. None the less I felt my researches had not been entirely in vain; they had, I was sure, helped my brain combat the damage done by my accident. In support of this belief there stood the fact that those mental lapses of mine had at last completely disappeared (or so I thought) and my physical health, too, had returned almost fully to normal.

It was about this time that I learned of the gravel-pits at Bleakstone, determining to journey there at my earliest convenience to see if I could find some of the reputedly many and various fossils with which the area allegedly abounded.

Jason had watched closely my return through the various stages of recovery, but was still more than a little worried when I begged of him the use of his car to go out to Bleakstone for a day or two. I argued, however, that the change of scenery could only do me good, that I badly needed the exercise of scrambling over the rocks and pebbles of the gravel-pits. Yet in the end, despite all my protests, I had to resort to a promise of calling Jason at least daily on the telephone (to report of my continuing good health and on the results of my expedition) before he would agree to loan me his car—and then he would only agree on the additional guarantee that I never exceeded the speed limits laid down by the highway authorities.

No doubt about it, my nephew had become a decided pest, and it was not without a sigh of relief that I finally took leave of him and commenced the drive through to Bleakstone.

Now this was more like it!—a return to one of the real pleasures of my youth, when I had often used to scramble in the gullies and quarries of the moors in search of centuried relics of Earth's prehistory. I felt actually excited, and as the miles passed beneath the wheels of the car my exuberance grew to a genuine joy in living the like of which I had not known for many a year.

I arrived at the village at about 6 p.m., leaving the car in the car park of The George. I booked a room for three days at that same inn and then went out to a nearby stationers. I was fortunate at that hour to find the proprietor still at work, and bought quite cheaply a large-scale map of the local area with the fossil-pits and lanes and paths leading to them clearly marked.

By then it was too late to do anything that night, so I ate a hearty meal with a pint of 'best' at The George and retired reasonably early—immediately after calling Jason on the telephone—in order to be up, about and away on my rock-hounding trip first thing after breakfast.

Now, I am one of those people who very rarely dream, and then little of any extraordinary content; in view of which fact I could only put the fantastically *protracted* contents of my uneasy slumbers that night down to the consumption of too large a meal taken too late … in combination, perhaps, with the strength of the local country brew! This, I reflected the next morning, could be the only explanation, for my dreams had been particularly vivid, if fragmentary in parts, quite *outre,* and extensive in other parts beyond belief!

They had involved my discovery of a long row of many dinosaur fossils, all of them taking on flesh before my eyes to become a marching line of great green monsters resembling in certain respects the creature of the green figurine at Radcar. I stood in the quarry where I had found the centuried bones and watched this line of reincarnated creatures descend into a huge cleft in the rock-face which closed up after the last of them had entered.

In another part of the dream I saw myself as a child again, scrambling over desolate rock-piles in search of a ‘lost Inca city”, and there were other brief visions of some vast underwater fortress wherein swam denizens of the most hideous nightmares.

The extended part of my dreams consisted of one long, unbroken and exact *memory* of my early life during the years between my seventeenth and twentieth birthdays. To be more specific, I *relived* while sleeping every single day and night of those earlier years!—even to the extent of having dreams within dreams which were perfect replicas of those I had known of old. And I had relived those three years to such an unbelievable exactitude that the wonder is I did not age by that same period of time in the course of the single night! Yet, deep down, all the while, I had known somehow that I only dreamed. Heaven-only-knows what inexplicable processes my mind underwent to compress the occurrences of three whole years into less than eight hours!

I was relieved on waking—no, *astonished* might better describe my feelings—to find all normal, with bright sunshine streaming in through the windows of my room at The George …

But strange though my dreams had been they were soon pushed into the back of my mind. I had things to do other than worry needlessly over the fruits of indigestion ripened by self-indulgence! I prayed that these were the *only* causes of my incredible dreams; that those dreams themselves would not herald a more serious *derangement* in myself.

There was a slight breeze moving the trees and hedgerows, the air was fresh and sweet following a light night rain, and the sun was already high by the time I finished my fruit juice and coffee to set out—armed with my map, a cold chisel and a hammer—for the nearest gravel-pit. Perhaps it was the excitement, perhaps the sudden exercise following my quite long period of physical inactivity, I do not know for sure; I remember only scrambling down the side of a shallow pit and commencing the splitting of a piece of rock … and then no more …

When I “came to”, as it were, I had no idea where I was, other than that I was certainly not in the original pit of my choice. That I was in a pit was irrefutable, but this one had walls which were quite high and steep, and I must have had the devil of a job getting down them in the state in which I had been. Obviously I had suffered a relapse, but I could remember nothing whatsoever of it except that the palaeontological theme of my previous conscious intentions had predominated throughout.

It took me some time to climb out of the pit, and when I had done so I was quite horrified to discover that my unremembered wanderings had carried me a distance of well over a mile from my starting point! Time, too, had flown, for my watch showed me that the day already was well into its afternoon.

That was the end of my rock-hounding for the day. Why, *anything* might have happened to me! I could easily have broken my neck attempting a climb so venturesome as the steep sides of that gravel-pit. Yet, to an extent, I must have known what I was about—there were one or two small, common fossils in my pockets …

Tired and disappointed that my recovery from the car accident was not the complete thing I had thought it, I made my way slowly back to The George. There I telephoned Jason, as promised, but I told him nothing of my setback for I liked the quiet Yorkshire village and was still convinced that a few more days there would do me good. There seemed little point in worrying my nephew over something which (I fervently prayed) might never occur again.

Later I went into the smoke-room where I took an unoccupied corner table. There were one or two customers, regulars, at the bar drinking beer from their own, personal mugs, and a small party of students sat at some nearby tables. Within the half-hour the latter group left the inn and a few moments later I heard their car pull away into the night. Now that the bar was quieter I took my briefcase and removed from it the magazine with the photographs of the figurine. It could do no harm to have another look at the thing.

I had just opened the magazine to the pages carrying those remarkable pictures when the elderly, balding barman, not so busy now, came over to my table to chat. At least, I assumed that such was his intention, but as soon as he saw the open journal his expression changed from one of friendly interest to a frown of puzzlement and surprise. His attention seemed riveted

on the photographs. I smiled, folding the page so that he could see the pictures better:

"Rare, isn't it? A very weird thing to look at…"

"Weird?—yes, I'll grant you that, Guv'nor—but *rare*?" He cocked his head on one side enquiringly.

"Oh, yes," I confirmed. "Quite rare, unique! So far as is known, there's only one like it. It's in the museum at Radcar, where these photographs were taken—the only surviving fragment of an unknown, early English civilization …"

His interest quickened: "You've seen the real thing then, have you Guv'? I mean, not just these photographs?"

"Why, yes—" I answered, "I saw it just a few weeks ago, at Radcar. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I don't like to stick my neck out," he said, "but if you'll just take a short walk down the street to the police station – well, you'll be able to see another! I saw it myself this morning, in the property room, when I went in to pick up a wallet I lost a day or two ago …"

"*Another figurine!*" I leapt to my feet. "Here in Bleakstone? Are you sure?"

"Positive!" he answered, peering more closely at the photographs. "I mean, a fellow's not likely to forget the looks of one of *those* things in a hurry, now is he?"

III: The Second Figurine

[*From the Notebooks of Professor Ewart Masters*]

So there I was back on the trail again!

It would have been pointless to try to go off to bed early as I had planned (I could never have got to sleep with the thought in my head that within a distance of a few hundred yards a second figurine awaited my attention), so instead I returned my briefcase to my room and then left The George to walk down to the police station, bringing myself into the presence of the weighty night- duty constable, PC Edwards.

I got straight to the point and asked the policeman if I might be allowed to see the figurine. I did not need to furnish him with much of a description of the statuette before he nodded his head in recognition of my subject.

“Oh, yes—that thing! Well, I don’t think there’s any reason you shouldn’t see it, sir, but I’m afraid you're not allowed inside the property room. If you’ll wait here and sit yourself down, I’ll bring it to you.”

He lifted his bulky, blue—clad form from behind his desk and disappeared into an adjoining room closing the door after him. In the space of a few seconds—during which time, short as it was, I fidgeted impatiently—he was back again with the figurine.

I had not really known what to expect. It seemed too much of a coincidence—the odds were stacked far too heavily against it—that a duplicate of the green statuette in the museum at Radcar should exist here at the site I had chosen for my rock-hounding, and that I should so easily stumble across it. Of course, the village was a backwater, one of those places that perpetually hover on the edge of modernity without ever actually becoming involved, and tucked away in the confines of this tiny village police station—why!—almost anything might vanish, unclaimed, into complete obscurity. The constable carefully placed the object of my enquiries on the desk before me, dusting it down with his handkerchief.

Delighted beyond my wildest dreams and equally excited, I reached out and touched the thing. My fingers trembled as they followed the lines of its contours. Oh, yes … there was no doubt about it. From the smooth baldness of the head, with its piercingly intelligent eyes and tiny, almost circular ears; to the folded arms with their flat hands and blunt, webbed fingers; down the lizard—like body to the powerful legs and webbed feet, the greenstone figurine was indeed the duplicate of the piece in the museum.

Even the short tail was there, curving down and back and giving the whole composition an almost natural balance. “Almost’ natural? An understatement, that, for the thing, despite its irrefutable alienage, looked perfectly … well … *natural*; and once again, as I had with its twin at Radcar, I found myself certain that the figurine had been made in the form of a living model! Yet how could that possibly be?

“Funny story attached to that there,” Constable Edwards informed, breaking into my thoughts, squinting wisely at the thing on his desk. “It’s been here with some other stuff ever since Dilham police station closed down. Handed in by a Mrs. White, it was, after the case proper was closed. P’raps you’d care to see the original report and notes? I shouldn’t let you see any paperwork, really—but seeing as how it’s all long done with, and provided you'd swear never to breathe a word as how you’ve seen it—I’ll

let you read it. That is, if you've the time to spare? I appreciate a bit of company on late shift."

If I had the time to spare, indeed! "I'd like very much to see anything you can show me with any bearing at all on this … *model*," I told him. "And I promise you that any confidences will be strictly inviolable—you can have complete faith in my discretion …"

Which was how the following statement, police report and notes were first brought to my attention …

IV: The Sister City

[*Being the Statement of Robert Krug*]

This manuscript attached as
Annex 'A' to report number
M—Y—127/52, dated 7 August 1952.

Towards the end of the war, when our London home was bombed and both my parents were killed, I was hospitalized through my own injuries and forced to spend the better part of two years on my back. It was during this period of my youth—I was only seventeen when I left the hospital—that I formed, in the main, the enthusiasm which in later years developed into a craving for travel, adventure and knowledge of earth's elder antiquities. I had always had a wanderer's nature, but was so restricted during those two, dreary years that when my chance for adventure eventually came I made up for wasted time by letting that nature hold full sway.

Not that those long, painful months were totally devoid of pleasures. Between operations, when my health would allow it, I read avidly in the hospital's library, primarily to forget my bereavement, eventually to be carried along to those worlds of ancient wonder created by Walter Scott in his enchanting *Arabian Nights.*

Apart from delighting me tremendously, the book helped to take my mind off the things I had heard said about me in the wards. It had been put about that I was different; allegedly the doctors had found something strange in my physical make—up. There were whispers about the peculiar qualities of my skin and the slightly extending horny cartilage at the base of

my spine. There was talk about the fact that my fingers and toes were ever—so—slightly webbed; and being, as I was, so totally devoid of hair, I became the recipient of many queer glances.

These things plus my name, Robert Krug, did nothing to increase my popularity at the hospital. In fact, at a time when Hitler was still occasionally devastating London with his bombs, a surname like Krug, with its implications of Germanic ancestry, was probably more a hindrance to friendship than all my other peculiarities put together.

With the end of the war I found myself rich; the only heir to my father's wealth, and still not out of my teens. I had left Scott's Jinns, *Ghouls and Efreets* far behind me but was returned to the same *type* of thrill I had known with the *Arabian Nights* by the popular publication of Lloyd's *Excavations on Sumerian Sites*. In the main it was that book which was responsible for the subsequent awe in which I ever held those magical words: "Lost Cities'.

In the months that followed, indeed through all my remaining—formative—years, Lloyd's work remained a landmark, followed as it was by many more volumes in a like vein. I read avidly of Layard's *Nineveh and Babylon* and *Early Adventures in Persia, Susiana and Babylonia.* I dwelled long over such works as Budge's *Rise and Progress of Assyriology* and Burckhardt's *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land.*

Nor were the fabled lands of Mesopotamia the only places of interest to me. Fictional Shangri—La and Ephiroth ranked equally beside the reality of Mycenae, Knossos, Palmyra and Thebes. I read excitedly of Atlantis and Chichen—Itza, never bothering to separate fact from fancy, and dreamed equally longingly of the Palace of Minos in Crete and Unknown Kadath in the Cold Waste.

What I read of Sir Amery Wendy—Smith's African expedition in search of Dead G'harne confirmed my belief that certain myths and legends are not far removed from historical fact. If no less a person than that eminent antiquarian and archaeologist had equipped an expedition to search for a jungle city considered by most reputable authorities to be purely mythological … why! His failure meant nothing compared with the fact that he had *tried* …

While others, before my time, had ridiculed the broken figure of the demented explorer who returned alone from the jungles of the Dark Continent I tended to emulate his deranged fancies—as his theories have

been considered—re-examining the evidence for Chyria and G'harne and delving ever deeper into the fragmentary antiquities of legendary cities and lands with such unlikely names as R’lyeh, Ephiroth, Mnar and Hyperborea.

As the years passed my body healed completely and I grew from a fascinated youth into a dedicated man. Not that I ever guessed what drove me to explore the ill—lit passages of history and fantasy. I only knew that there was something fascinating for me in the rediscovery of those ancient worlds of dream and legend.

Before I began those far—flung travels which were destined to occupy me on and off for four years, I bought a house in Marske at the very edge of the Yorkshire Moors. This was the region in which I had spent my childhood, and there had always been about the brooding moors a strong feeling of *affinity* which was hard for me to define. I felt closer to home there somehow—and infinitely closer to the beckoning past. It was with a genuine reluctance that I eventually left my moors, but the inexplicable lure of distant places and foreign names called me away, across the seas.

First I visited those lands that were within easy reach, ignoring the places of dreams and fancies but promising myself that later—later!

Egypt, with all its mystery! Djoser’s step-pyramid at Saqqarah, Imhotep’s masterpiece; the ancient mastabas, tombs of centuries-dead kings; the inscrutably smiling sphinx; the Sneferu pyramid at Meidum and those of Chephren and Cheops at Giza; the mummies, the brooding Gods…

Yet in spite of all its wonder Egypt could not hold me for long. The sand and heat were damaging to my skin which tanned quickly and roughened almost overnight.

Crete, the Nymph of the beautiful Mediterranean … Theseus and the Minotaur … the Palace of Minos at Knossos … all wonderful—but that which I sought was not there.

Salamis and Cyprus, with all their ruins of ancient civilizations, each held me but a month or so. Yet it was in Cyprus that I learned of yet another personal peculiarity; my queer abilities in water …

I became friendly with a party of divers at Famagusta. Daily they were diving for amphorae and other relics of the past offshore from the ruins at Salenica on the southeast coast. At first the fact that I could remain beneath the water three times as long as the best of them, and swim further without the aid of fins or snorkel, was only a source of amazement to my friends; but after a few days I noticed that they were having less and less to do with

me. They did not care for the hairlessness of my body or the webbing, which seemed to have lengthened, between my toes and fingers. They did not like the bump low at the rear of my bathing—costume or the way I could converse with them in their own tongue when I had never studied Greek in my life.

It was time to move on. My travels took me all over the world and I became something of an authority on those dead civilizations which were my one joy in life. Then, in Phetri, I heard of the Nameless City.

Remote in the desert of Araby lies the Nameless City, crumbling and inarticulate, its low walls nearly hidden by the sands of uncounted ages. It was of this place that Abdul Alhazred the mad poet dreamed on the night before he sang his inexplicable couplet:

> That is not dead which can eternal lie,
> And with strange aeons even death may die.

My Arab guides thought I, too, was mad when I ignored their warnings and continued in search of that City of Devils. Their fleet—footed camels took them off in more than necessary haste, for they had noticed my skin's scaly strangeness and certain other unspoken things which made them uneasy in my presence. Also, they had been nonplussed, as I had been myself, at the strange fluency with which I used their tongue.

Of what I saw and did in Kara-Shehr I will not write. It must suffice to say that I learned of things which sent me off again on my travels to seek Sarnath the Doomed in what was once the land of Mnar …

No man knows the whereabouts of Sarnath, and it is better that this remain so. Of my travels in search of the place and the difficulties which I encountered at every phase of my journey I will therefore recount nothing. Yet my discovery of the slime—sunken city, and of the incredibly aged ruins of nearby lb, were major links forged in the lengthening chain of knowledge which was slowly bridging the awesome gap between this world and my ultimate destination. And I, bewildered, did not even know where or what that destination was.

For three weeks I wandered the slimy shores of the still lake which hides Sarnath, and at the end of that time, driven by a fearful compulsion, I once again used those unnatural aquatic powers of mine and began exploring beneath the surface of that hideous morass.

That night I slept with a small green figurine, rescued from the sunken ruins, pressed to my bosom. In my dreams I saw my mother and father—but dimly, as if through a mist—and they beckoned to me …

The next day I went again to stand in the centuried ruins of lb, and as I was making ready to leave I saw the inscribed stone which gave me my first real clue. The wonder is that I could read what was written on that weathered, aeon—old pillar; for it was written in a curious cuneiform older even than the inscriptions of Geph's broken columns, and it had been pitted by the ravages of time.

It told nothing of the beings who once lived in lb, or anything of the long—dead inhabitants of Sarnath. It spoke only of the destruction which the men of Sarnath had brought to the beings of lb—and of the resulting Doom that came to Sarnath. This doom was wrought by the gods of the beings of lb … but of those 'Gods' I could likewise learn not a thing. I only knew that reading that stone and being in lb had stirred long—hidden memories, perhaps even ancestral memories, in my mind. Again that feeling of closeness to home, that feeling I always felt so strongly on the moors in Yorkshire, flooded over me. Then, as I idly moved the rushes at the base of the pillar with my foot, yet more chiselled inscriptions appeared. I cleared away the slime and read on. There were only a few lines … but those lines contained my clue:

> Ib is gone but the Gods live on. Across the world is the Sister City, hidden in the earth, in the barbarous lands of Zimmeria. There The People flourish yet, and there will the Gods ever be worshipped: even unto the coming of Cthulhu …

Many months later in Cairo, I sought out a man steeped in elder—lore, a widely acknowledged authority on forbidden antiquities and prehistoric lands and legends. This sage had never heard of Zimmeria: but he did know of a land which had once had a name much similar. "And where did this "Cimmeria" lie?" I asked.

"Unfortunately," my erudite adviser answered, consulting a chart, "most of Cimmeria now lies beneath the sea. Originally … it lay between Vanaheim and Nemedia in ancient Hyborea."

"You say *most* of it is sunken?" I queried… "But what of the land which lies *above* the sea?"

Perhaps it was the eagerness in my voice which caused him to glance at me the way he did. Again, perhaps it was my queer aspect: for the hot suns

of many lands had hardened my hairless skin most peculiarly and a strong web now showed between my fingers.

"Why do you wish to know?" he asked. "What is it you are seeking?"

"Home!" I answered instinctively, not knowing what prompted me to say it.

"Yes …" he mused, studying me closely. "That might well be … You are an Englishman, are you not? Yes? May I enquire from which part?"

"From the north—east," I answered, reminded suddenly of my moors. "Why do you want to know?"

"My friend, you have searched in vain," he smiled. "For Cimmeria, or that which remains of it, encompasses all of that north—eastern part of England which is your homeland. Is it not ironic? In order to find your home you have left it…"

That night fate dealt me a card which I could not ignore. In the lobby of my hotel was a table devoted solely to the reading habits of the English—speaking residents. Upon it was a wide variety of books, paperbacks, newspapers and journals, ranging from *The Reader's Digest* and *Time* to the *News of the World,* and to pass a few hours in relative coolness I sat beneath a soothing fan with a glass of iced water and idly glanced through the pages of one of the newspapers. Abruptly, on turning a page, I came upon a picture and an article, which, when I had scanned the latter through, caused me to book a seat on the next flight to London.

The picture was poorly reproduced but was still clear enough for me to see that it depicted a small, green figurine—*the duplicate of that which I had salvaged from the ruins of Sarnath beneath the still pool…!*

The article, as best I can remember, read like this:

"Mr. Samuel Davies, of 17 Heddington Crescent, Radcar, found the beautiful relic of bygone ages pictured above in a stream whose only known source is the cliff—face at Sarby—on—the—Moor. The figurine is now in Radcar Museum, having been donated by Mr. Davies, and is being studied by the curator, Prof. Gordon Walmsley of Goole. So far Prof. Walmsley has been unable to throw any light on the figurine's origin but the Wendy—Smith Test, a scientific means of checking the age of archaeological fragments, has shown it to be over ten thousand years old. The green figurine does not appear to have any connection with any of the better known civilizations of ancient England and is thought to be a find of rare importance. Unfortunately, expert pot-holers have given unanimous

opinions that the stream, where it springs from the cliffs at Sarby, is totally untraversable."

The next day, during the flight, I slept for an hour or so and again, in my dreams, I saw my parents. As before they appeared to me in a mist—but their beckonings were stronger and more *positive* than in that previous dream and in the blanketing vapours around them were strange figures, bowed in seeming obeisance, while a chant of teasing familiarity rang from hidden and nameless throats…

I had wired my housekeeper from Cairo informing her of my returning, and when I arrived at my house in Marske I found a solicitor waiting for me. This gentleman introduced himself as being Mr. Harvey, of the Radcar firm of Harvey, Johnson and Harvey, and presented me with a large sealed envelope. It was addressed to me, *in my father's hand*, and Mr. Harvey informed me his instructions had been to deliver the envelope into my hands on the attainment of my twenty—first birthday. Unfortunately I had been out of the country at the time, almost a year earlier, but the firm had kept in touch with my housekeeper so that on my return the agreement made nearly seven years earlier between my father and Mr. Harvey's firm might be kept.

After Mr. Harvey left I dismissed my woman and opened the envelope. The manuscript within was not in any script I had ever learned at school. This was the language I had seen written on that aeon—old pillar in ancient lb; none the less I knew instinctively that it had been my father's hand which had written the thing. And of course, I could read it as easily as if it were in English.

The many and diverse contents of the letter made it, as I have said, more akin to a manuscript in its length and it is not my purpose to completely reproduce it. That would take too long and the speed with which The First Change is taking place does not permit it. I will merely set down the specially significant points which the letter brought to my attention.

In disbelief I read the first paragraph—but, as I read on, that disbelief soon became a weird amazement, which in turn became a savage joy at the fantastic disclosures revealed by those timeless hieroglyphs of lb.

My parents were not dead! They had merely gone away; gone home …

That time nearly seven years ago, when I had returned home from a school reduced to ruins by the bombing, our London home had been

purposely sabotaged by my father. A powerful explosive had been rigged, primed to be set off by the first air—raid siren, and then my parents had gone off in secrecy back to the moors. They had not known, I realized, that I was on my way home from the ruined school where I boarded. Even now they were unaware that I had arrived at the house just as the radar defences of England's military services had picked out those hostile dots in the sky. That plan which had been so carefully laid to fool men into believing that my parents were dead had worked well; but it had also nearly destroyed me! And all this time I, too, had believed them killed. But why had they gone to such extremes? What was that secret which it was so necessary to hide from our fellow men—and where were my parents now? I read on …

Slowly all was revealed. We were not *indigenous* to England, my parents and I, and they had brought me here as an infant from our homeland; a land quite near yet paradoxically far away. The letter went on to explain how *all* the children of our race are brought here as infants, for the atmosphere of our homeland is not conducive to health in the young and unformed.

The difference in my case had been that my mother was unable to part with me. That was the awful thing! Though all the children of our race must wax and grow up away from their homeland, the elders can only rarely depart from their native clime. This fact is determined by their physical appearance throughout the greater period of their lifespan. *For they are not, for the better part of their lives, either the physical or mental counterparts of ordinary men!*

This means that children have to be left on doorsteps, at the entrances of orphanages, in churches and in other places where they will be found and cared for; for in extreme youth there is little difference between my race and the race of men. As I read I was reminded of those tales of fantasy I had once loved; of ghouls and fairies and other creatures who left their young to be reared by human beings and who stole human children to be brought up in their own likenesses.

Was *that,* then, my destiny? Was I to be a ghoul? I read on.

I learned that the people of my race can only leave our native country twice in their lives; once in youth—when, as I have explained, they are brought here of necessity to be left until they attain the approximate age of twenty—one years—and once in later life, when *changes* in their appearances make them compatible to *outside* conditions. My parents had just reached this latter stage of their development when I was born. Because

of my mother's devotion they had forsaken their *duties* in our own land and had brought me personally to England where, ignoring The Laws, they stayed with me. My father had brought certain treasures with him to ensure an easy life for himself and my mother until that time should come when they would be *forced* to leave me—the Time of The Second Change—when to stay would be to alert mankind of our existence.

That time had eventually arrived and they had covered up their departure back to our own, secret land by blowing up our London home; letting the authorities and I (though it must have broken my mother's heart) believe them dead of a German bomb raid.

And how could they have done otherwise? They dared not take the chance of telling me *what I really was*; for who can say what effect such a disclosure might have had on me, I who had barely begun to show my differences? They had to hope I would discover the Secret myself, or at least the greater part of it, which I have done! But to be doubly sure my father left his letter …

The letter also told how not many *foundlings* find their way back to their own land. Accidents claim some and others go mad. At this point I was reminded of something I had read somewhere of two inmates of Oakdeene Sanatorium near Glasgow who are so horribly mad *and so unnatural in aspect* that they are not even allowed to be seen and even their nurses cannot abide to stay near them for long.

Yet others become hermits in wild and inaccessible places and, worst of all, still others suffer more hideous fates—and I shuddered as I read what those fates were! But there were those few who did manage to get back. These were the lucky ones, those who returned to claim their rights; and while some of them were *guided* back—by adults of the race during second visits—others made it by instinct or luck.

Yet horrible though this over—all plan of existence seemed to be, the letter explained its logic. For my homeland could not support many of my kind, and those perils of lunacy (as brought on by inexplicable physical changes), accidents, and those other fates I have mentioned, act as a system of selection whereby only the fittest in mind and body return to the land of their birth.

But there, I have just finished reading the letter through a second time—having interrupted my hasty scribbling of this document to do so—and already I begin to feel a stiffening of my limbs! My father's manuscript has

arrived barely in time. I have long been worried by my growing *differences.* The webbing on my hands now extends almost to the small, first knuckles and my skin is fantastically thick, rough and ichthyic. The short tail which protrudes from the base of my spine is now not so much an oddity as an *addition*; an extra limb which, in the light of what I now know, is not an oddity at all but the most natural thing in the world! My hairlessness, with the discovery of my destiny, has also ceased to be an embarrassment to me. I am different to men, true, but is that not as it should be? *For I am not a man!*

Ah, the lucky fates which caused me to pick up that newspaper in Cairo! Had I not seen that picture or read that article I might not have returned so soon to my moors … and I shudder to think what might have become of me then. What would I have done after The First Change had altered me? Would I have hurried, disguised and wrapped in smothering clothes, to some distant land—there to live the life of a hermit? Perhaps I would have returned to lb or the Nameless City, to dwell in ruins and solitude until my appearance was again capable of sustaining my existence among men. And what after that—after The Second Change?

Perhaps I would have gone mad at such inexplicable alterations in my person. Who can say but that there might have been another inmate at Oakdeene? On the other hand, my fate might have been worse than all these; for I may have been drawn to dwell in the depths, to be one with the Deep Ones in the worship of Dagon and Great Cthulhu, as have others before me.

But no! By good fortune, by the learning gained on my far journeys and by the help given me by my father’s document, I have been spared all those terrors which others of my kind have known. I will return to lb’s Sister City, to Lh-yib, in that land of my birth *beneath* these Yorkshire Moors; that land from which was washed the green figurine which guided me back to these shores, that figurine which is the duplicate of the one I raised from beneath the pool at Sarnath. I will return to be worshipped by those whose ancestral brothers died at lb on the spears of the men of Sarnath; those who are so aptly described on the Brick Cylinders of Kadatheron; those who chant voicelessly in the abyss. I will return to Lh-yib!

For even now I hear my mother’s voice, calling me as she did when I was a child and used to wander these very moors: “Bob! Little Bo! Where are you?”

Bo, she used to call me, and would only laugh when I asked her why. But why not? Was Bo not a fitting name? Robert … Bob … Bo? What odds?

Blind fool that I have been! I never really pondered the fact that my parents were never quite like other people, not even towards the end …

Were not my ancestors worshipped in grey—stone Ib before the coming of men, in the earliest days of earth's evolution? I should have guessed my identity when first I brought that figurine up out of the slime; *for the features of the thing were as my own features will be after The First Change, and engraved upon its base in the ancient letters of Ib—letters I could read because they were part of my native language, the precursor of all languages—was my own name!*

Bokrug:

Water-Lizard God of the people of lb and Lh-yib, the Sister City!

Note:

Sir,

Attached to this manuscript, Annex 'A' to my report, was a brief note of explanation addressed to the NECB in Newcastle and reproduced as follows:

Robert Krug
Marske
Yorks.
Evening—19 July 1952

Secretary and Members,
NECB, Newcastle—on—Tyne.
Gentlemen of the North—East Coal Board,

My discovery whilst abroad, in the pages of a popular science magazine, of your Yorkshire Moors Project, scheduled to commence next summer, determined me, upon the culmination of some recent discoveries of mine, to write you this letter.

You will see that my letter is a protest against your proposals to drill deep into the moors in order to set off underground explosions in the hope of creating pockets of gas to be tapped as part of the country's natural

resources. It is quite possible that the undertaking envisioned by your scientific advisors would mean the destruction of two ancient races of sentient life. The prevention of such destruction is that which causes me to break the laws of my race and thus announce the existence of them and their servitors.

In order to explain my protest more fully I think it necessary that I tell my whole story. Perhaps upon reading the enclosed manuscript you will suspend indefinitely your projected operations.

Robert Krug

Sgt. J. T. Miller
Dilham
Yorks.
7 August 1952

POLICE REPORT M-Y-127/52 *Alleged Suicide*

Sir,

I have to report that at Dilham, on 20 July 1952, at about 4.30 p.m., I was on duty at the police station when three children (statements attached at Annex ‘B’) reported to the desk Sgt. that they had seen a ‘funny man’ climb the fence at Devil’s Pool, ignoring the warning notices, and throw himself into the stream where it vanishes into the hillside.

Accompanied by the eldest of the children I went to the scene of the alleged occurrence, about three-quarters of a mile over the moors from Dilham, where the spot that the ‘funny man’ allegedly climbed the fence was pointed out to me. There were signs that someone had recently gone over the fence; trampled grass and grass stains on the timbers.

With slight difficulty I climbed the fence myself but was unable to decide whether or not the children had told the truth. There was no evidence in or around the pool to suggest that anyone had thrown himself in—but this is hardly surprising as at that point, where the stream enters the hillside, the water rushes steeply downward into the earth. Once in the water only an extremely strong swimmer would be able to get back out. Three experienced pot-holers were lost at this same spot in

August last year when they attempted a partial reconnoitre of the stream’s underground course.

When I further questioned the boy I had taken with me, I was told that a *second* man had been on the scene prior to the incident. This other man had been seen to limp, as though he was hurt, into a nearby cave. This had occurred shortly before the ‘funny man’—described as being green and having a short, flexible tail—came out of the same cave, went over the fence and threw himself into the pool.

On inspecting the said cave I found what appeared to be an animal—hide of some sort, split down the arms and legs and up the belly, in the manner of the trophies of big—game hunters. This object was rolled up neatly in one corner of the cave and is now in the found—property room at the police station in Dilham. Near this hide was a complete set of good—quality gent’s clothing, neatly folded and laid down. In the inside pocket of the jacket I found a wallet containing, along with fourteen pounds in one pound notes, a card bearing the address of a house in Marske; namely, 11 Sunderland Crescent. These articles of clothing, plus the wallet, are also now in the found property room.

At about 6.30 p.m., I went to the above address in Marske and interviewed the housekeeper, one Mrs. White, who provided me with a statement (attached at Annex ‘C’) in respect of her partial employer, Robert Krug. Mrs. White also gave me two envelopes, one of which contained the manuscript attached to this report at Annex ‘A’. Mrs. White had found this envelope, sealed, with a note asking her to deliver it, when she went to the house on the afternoon of the 20th about half an hour before I arrived. In view of the enquiries I was making and because of their nature, i.e. an investigation into the possible suicide of Mr. Krug, Mrs. White thought it was best that the envelope be given to the police. Apart from this she was at a loss what to do with it because Krug had forgotten to address it. As there was the possibility of the envelope containing a suicide note or dying declaration I accepted it.

The other envelope, which was unsealed, contained a manuscript in a foreign language and is now in the property room at Dilham.

In the two weeks since the alleged suicide, despite all my efforts to trace Robert Krug, no evidence has come to light to support the hope that he may still be alive. This, plus the fact that the clothing found in the cave has since been identified by Mrs White as being that which Krug was wearing the night before his disappearance, has determined me to request that my report be placed in the ‘unsolved’ file and that Robert Krug be listed as ‘missing’.

Note:

Sir,

Do you wish me to send a copy of the manuscript at Annex ‘A’—as requested of Mrs. White by Krug—to the Secretary of the North—East Coal Board?

Inspector I. L. Ianson
Yorks. County Constabulary
Radcar
Yorks.

Dear Sgt. Miller,

In answer to your note of the 7th. Take no further action on the Krug case. As you suggest, I have had the man posted as missing, believed a suicide. As for his *document*; well, the man was either mentally unbalanced or a monumental hoaxer—possibly a combination of both! Regardless of the fact that certain things in his story are matters of indisputable fact, the majority of the thing appears to be the product of a diseased mind.

Meanwhile I await your progress—report on that other case. I refer to the baby found in the church pews at Eely—on—the—Moor last June. How are you going about tracing the mother?

V: Correlation

[*From the Notebooks of Professor Ewart Masters*]

I left the police station about an hour before midnight, but I was awake until at least three in the morning. My mind was working overtime; so feverishly in fact that sleep—until I had thought on certain things and sorted them out somewhat—was simply out of the question.

The next day I was up at a correspondingly late hour, walking back down to the police station before lunch. My purpose was to ask the duty constable to put me in telephone contact with Inspector Ianson in Radcar—but here a setback. The young policeman seemed quite well informed, and he was able to tell me that two years previously the inspector (apparently a man of substantial independent means) had abruptly quit his job to go off

with a woman! The couple were thought to have gone abroad. A pity, because of course Ianson would have been able to tell me what he had meant by ‘matters of indisputable fact”, with regard to Krug’s statement.

All right; I would have to find out on my own!

No doubt about it, Krug’s document was an astonishing thing, and I was in full agreement with Ianson’s assessment; yet for a man I had never previously heard of this Krug—hoaxer and all—seemed damnably erudite, formidable, in ancient lore. There seemed to be so many parallels between his work and mine. Perhaps we had simply followed similar leads towards our mutual ‘discovery’ of apparently like civilizations in the ancient lands of East and West. And why not? Gordon Walmsley, too, had obviously stumbled across just such leads not long before his oddly circumstanced death.

Certainly many of Krug’s source books had been the same as mine—but where could the man possibly have gained his knowledge concerning the *Brick Cylinders of Kadatheron*? And again, this *before* those relics had officially been discovered! This was positively astonishing! Had I slipped up somewhere? Had Angstrom known specifically what he was looking for before he left for the East, and had he publicized the fact? No, I knew and had followed his work too closely for that, and I was perfectly sure that such had not been the case. Oh! I was not infallible. I had missed the original discovery of the moors figurine, true, but that had been pardonable. For some reason the thing had received but a minimum of publicity. Angstrom's expedition had been a different thing entirely.

The deeper I dug the more puzzling the whole thing became. There were in Krug’s manuscript for instance those references to R'lyeh and Mnar. Now, I had heard of legendary Atlantis, of course, and of fictional Shangri-la, the Land of Eternal Youth—but R’lyeh? And yet the name rang a bell! Yes, and after a moment’s thought I knew where I had heard it before. Many years earlier I had been allowed a glimpse—*only* a glimpse—into the *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred in the library at Miskatonic University in America. And something else had stayed in my mind following that peep into those blasphemous pages; for although even in my youth I had never been a frequent dreamer, I remembered having seen horrors in my sleep for many a night after my glance into the pages of that work. The thing that had bothered me so had been Alhazred’s vague description of a creature called a Shoggoth; a monstrous thing not bearing

studied description. And Walmsley, at some time, must also have seen a copy of the *Necronomicon* somewhere, that much was obvious. He had mentioned ‘Shoggoth—tissue”, in some connection or other, in his death—notes.

Then there was that mention of Sarnath. That made twice I had heard of the place: once in the translation from *The Ilarnek Papyri,* and again in Krug’s document.

Now; I had seen a Sarnath, I had actually walked in the ruins of a Sarnath! But my Sarnath and Krug’s were two entirely different places! The ruins *I* knew stood in the Deer Park in Benares, where Buddha preached his first sermon; and they were not, I knew, covered by any leprous, stagnant pool! Nor did my ruins exist in two distinctly separate units, as Krug had suggested with his ‘nearby Ib’ statement. Besides, he had quite clearly stated that ‘no man knows the whereabouts of Sarnath’; which was perhaps simply his way of saying that no such place as his city had ever existed! On the other hand, his reconstruction of the newspaper article—regarding the discovery of the moors figurine and its subsequent donation to the museum—was perfectly authentic. His mention of ‘Cthulhu’, too, was something from the *Necronomicon*, but Cthulhu's aeon—extinct cult was not a thing I knew a great deal about; I had always preferred to keep my researches and studies within the realms of possibility. Still, it went to show how remarkably well read the man had been in this sort of thing.

Now, I have said I agreed with Inspector Ianson's assessment of Krug as a madman—yet for the life of me I could not see why he had taken so negative an attitude. Would there have been any serious harm in sending the NECB a copy of Krug’s so—called ‘statement’? And for that matter, the inspector must have been a singularly short—sighted man not to have seen a sinister and rather ominous link between the Krug case and that other he had mentioned—that of the abandoned baby found in the church pews at Eeley. But no, on second thought that was unfair. Each to his own game, and a man holding so high a position in the police force is no fool. The fault was mine in that here I was trying to read significance into insignificant data; data of quite unproven relevance. None the less I would dearly have loved to see that manuscript in ‘a foreign language’ mentioned by Sgt. Miller in his report, but apparently the thing had been lost. Similarly the ‘animal—hide’ had also disappeared in the half—dozen years since its discovery in the cave near Devil’s Pool.

That brings me up to date in my notes. There are many tangled skeins here, and I promise myself that later I shall look to the unravelling of the more obscure and uncertain matters brought to light by my reading of the Krug case; not the least of them being that mention of certain inmates at Oakdeene! But for the moment, that will have to wait…

VI: Devil's Pool

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

First thing the next morning I drove out to Dilham and from the village proper made my way on foot across the moors to the fenced—off area at the base of a line of steep hills called Ellison's Heights.

There, behind a tall, semicircular curve of warning fencing, swirled the treacherous waters of Devil's Pool. The pool marked in fact the end of the surface route of an unimportant outlet of the River Swale. But the quiet waters of the rivulet seemed to gather strength as they approached and passed beneath the fencing, swelling and surging forward, gradually commencing the circular movements which terminated in the unknown sucking vortex of the whirlpool at the foot of the hills.

Devil's Pool, into which—if there was anything at all in the strange manuscript I had read—one Robert Krug, madman, had plunged himself in the lunatic belief that he was a 'God' returning to his rightful seat beneath the moors. Devil's Pool; beneath which, at some watery, light—less place, lay the lost remains of three professional speleologists who had vainly tried —using aqualungs and all the usual paraphernalia of the caver—to map the underground path of the disappearing stream.

I ignored the warning notices pasted to the high fence, and not without a deal of difficulty climbed it to have a closer look at the pool. The blackly swirling water reminded me greatly of a huge gramophone-record on a massive turntable, spinning half out in the open, half gurgling away beneath the undermined face of the steep hill, and I found myself strangely disturbed by its almost mesmeric motion.

An ominous place, this—a jumping—off place from the comparative congeniality of the moors into the dank darkness of ancient stygia …

Suddenly there flashed into my mind something I saw as being particularly relevant, yet at the same time paradoxically obscure; some lines

by E. P. Derby, from his book of nightmare lyrics: *Azathoth and Other Horrors.*

> … for cleverer Gods by far
> dream ’neath the moorland moss;
> Whose kin the night-things are,
> who scorn the Christ-Child's cross;
> Who journeyed from afar—
> when earth was young and gross—
> Whose ken is on a par
> with Daemon Azathoth's …
> Who fear the Pentik Star …!

These lines had no sooner passed before my mind’s eye than I found myself reeling helplessly at the edge of the rushing waters, tottering on the brink of the known world, and I flailed desperately with my arms as the foreign entity which had been my mind spun me dizzily away into vortices of its own conjuring …

VII: Underground
Dream-Phase One

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

I do not know how long the attack lasted. I think I must have gone straight from the pool back to Dilham for the car, and from there to Bleakstone, but I cannot be sure. I seem to remember walking—certainly some sort of physical movement—and a terrible fear, but of what I am likewise incapable of saying. The thought is indeed a fearsome one that I actually drove my nephew’s car during that phase of mental instability, yet it seems I must have done so. Certainly there later remained a picture in my mind of taking a drink in the bar of The George, and of talking with the barman again about the figurine—but no more than that…

If I had thought my dreams of the first night at The George protracted and strange, what was I to make of those which were yet to come? The trouble was that this time there was no dividing line, no passage from the waking world into that of dream, so that I could not *really* tell if what next

occurred was in fact a long-drawn-out dream or simply an extension of the lapse that began at Devil's Pool—that lapse which was nothing less than the harbinger of my brain's rapidly advancing deterioration.

I had suddenly found myself in nighted, chill and rushing waters! I had not even attempted to swim. Up—rushing currents had kept me on the surface of the water, bobbing me along like a cork down a rain—washed gutter; and though I had taken in an incredible amount of water my lungs still functioned, and I knew that my stomach, in normal reaction to my near—drowning, had been at work for a long time pumping its unwanted contents back into a crooning, unseen stream from which I must somehow have dragged myself.

There had been dank darkness, suffocating silence, the deafness of unconsciousness … then water—sounds, whispering wetness, the cold gurglings of ancient, weirdly articulate subterranean sumps. It was completely real … the black blindness, the lingering lightlessness, the almost amorous, caressing amaurosis …

And then I knew that I was underground … beneath the moors!

But in fact my prison was not the place of utter darkness I first thought it; for while on coming to my senses (is the expression pardonable?) the blackness had seemed complete, after a while, as my eyes gradually grew accustomed to the deep gloom, I made out high above me what appeared to be a pinprick of light, and it was purely by token of that unknown, crevice—like entry in some equally unknown gorge on the wild moors that my underground prison had any light at all. That thin, filtered glimmer groping down from the safe, sane world above, possibly saved me in my first 'conscious' moments from panic and madness.

My position was straight from Poe, yet to me infinitely worse than any premature burial; for a man entombed in a coffin at least knows the extent of his prison and must soon mercifully suffocate; but a man lost underground in limitless depths, yet with ample air and water, might linger on for weeks in a slow torture of starvation and stygian horror!

That minimum of God's light, sent down through what might have been light—years from the high hole in the roof of the cavern, gave my eyes at least something to cling to, and my mind a point on which to conjecture. I suppose I must have 'slept' through that first night, for I remember seeing the friendly, dim point of light slowly fade until the darkness was truly

complete, and then no more until quite suddenly I found myself ‘awake’, conscious, and with a gnawing hunger inside me.

I *had* slept within my sleep obviously, for again I had known dreams within dreams, and they had been quite as mad as those I had experienced previously at Bleakstone. There had been crooning voices, or at least sounds, noises made by living things at any rate (or were they simply disturbances on the invisible ether of my mind?) which had left me with impressions of great mystery and age, of limitless alienage, of an antiquity beyond conjecture, and an almost supernatural holiness akin to that feeling in the heart—more an ethereal than a physical thing—which one knows when listening to the reverberating echoes of a powerful choir within the sounding walls of a great cathedral.

These voices had at first seemed to be far away, in time as well as space, but they had drifted closer, ululant and throbbing until the stagnant air of my hole in the earth had seemed vibrant with their chanting … and then they had ceased. I had known the momentary fumblings of strange hands—or paws—and had felt upon me the scrutiny of eyes unlike the eyes of men.

No lights had illuminated my visitors, yet I had known and recognized them; those habitants of lb and Lh-yib, those minions of Bokrug; and then, even dreaming, I had been doubly sure I *only* dreamed, for nothing like these creatures of Earth’s youth could possibly remain extant anywhere in the normal waking world. Eventually I had been left alone again to my exhausted slumbers, and thus it remained until I awoke.

I say “I awoke”, and yet I simply moved from one level of nightmare to another; for outside, high above, it was ‘day’ again, and the friendly beam once more was flickering down to me in my cold stone prison. And in that prison, cold and hungry, I was as far removed as ever from my comfortable room at The George.

It was hunger that prompted me to drag my cramped body from the stream—side, to stumble near—blind about the confines of my great coffin.

“Coffin”, indeed! When first I found the mushrooms I was so lost in morbid reverie, a reverie completely in keeping with the chill damp of the place, that I thought they were great grave—worms—fat, white and squamous—waiting for my flesh to die. But the fatness was only their lush depth, and the scales were not scales but the mottling of the pileus—covered domes.

I ate some of them, ravenously, and then I ‘slept’ once more …

VIII: Bokrug
Dream-Phase Two

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

The period of comparative lucidity—if a *condition* such as I was in may be couched in any such terms—in which I eventually found myself following my meal of mushrooms in the cave of the stream, was one that I found completely contrary to any previously conceived ideas of mine concerning delusions or dream—obsessions. Of the fact that the condition was psychotic, there could be little doubt, and yet everything had a quality to it of the real and solid. There was none of the fuzziness of dream or nightmare to the edges of the clearly—defined visions I saw, none of fever's repetitious phrasing of words and sentences in conversation (oh, yes, this latter still to come!) and when I moved each motion I made produced a corresponding ache in those areas of my body bruised by my whirling dream—rush through heaven—only—knows what distances of subterranean waterway and by my blundering about the cave. And yet the things I saw, heard and felt—indeed all my sensations throughout that odd period—were certainly fantasies and figments of my own disorganized mental processes. In short, I *was* still dreaming … and my condition was rapidly worsening!

But more of that later. It would be best if I relate my experiences as they happened, in order to correctly define the magnitude of my fantasy.

My first impression was one of lying on my back in the lumpy loam of the fungus patch from which I had eaten, and of seeing in the near—distant darkness a glowing luminosity expanding or pulsating toward me. This vision was accompanied by an ululation, muted by distance, as of voices raised in praise, reminiscent of the prayer—like yet sepulchral sounds I had thought to hear in my semi-consciousness before I first 'awoke' to the confines of the dark cave.

As the eerie noises faded so the glowing light, now assuming a spherical shape some seven feet above the floor of the cave, further approached, and as it emerged it lit up the entrance to the narrow tunnel along which it had come. *It also illumined the creature pacing beneath it!*

I jerked bolt upright at sight of the thing, the short hairs on the back of my neck springing to attention, my scalp tingling, my unbelieving eyes taking in the whole of that alien yet strangely regal being!

Oh! I had seen likenesses of this creature before—but *only* likenesses! This was the living, breathing reality (or so my ruined senses would have had me believe), a walking, man-sized replica of the greenstone figurines! In fact, this was Bokrug—water-lizard god of Ib—reptilian lord of a city lost in the dim mists of time!

It kneeled before me, its short tail balancing it solidly in a posture that reminded me of certain Eastern idols, and the piercingly bright eyes in the thin—lipped, hairless face regarded me unemotionally. For a moment the thing sat there silently while I lay, propped up on my elbows, shivering uncontrollably. Then, amazingly, it spoke:

"You need not fear me, I mean you no harm."

"Bokrug!" I whispered, at a loss for words, at which the creature sat up straighter, an almost human frown visibly forming to crease its high forehead.

"You … know me?"

Suddenly it dawned on me that my conversation was with a creature of my own imaginings, a figment of nightmare and of my sadly impaired senses. I laughed out loud and fell back weakly on my bed of mushrooms, staring up at that alien face and the halo of moving light in which it was framed.

"I know you, yes—you're a little green god in a case at Radcar Museum—you're a figurine in the police station at Bleakstone. Oh, I know you all right! You're an hallucination within a dream—you're my injured brain rotting inside my head!" I flapped my hands uselessly, scrabbling at the loam about me.

On hearing my manner of expression and my mention of the museum, the frown vanished immediately from the creature's face. "You are a man of science then?"

For a while longer I lay there, thinking at first to ignore the hallucination, to let myself drift back into sleep within sleep. But then, as if in defiance of my own lassitude, I spoke:

"What I am makes no difference; I shall soon wake up back in The George at Bleakstone—or remain in this dream till they find me and take me off to some sanatorium or other to rot! You don't exist—and therefore you can't help me. Go away."

I closed my eyes, resting my aching head back in the spongy loam. A second or so passed and then I felt the pressure of powerful but gentle

hands pushing under my legs and shoulders. My head fell back and I let my arms droop listlessly as I was hoisted bodily up into the air. Then, feeling the smooth movements of the creature's walking, I opened my eyes again.

"Where are you taking me?"

The piercing eyes gazed back at me for a moment in a kind of cold compassion. "There is a place where you will be more comfortable—where food other than mushrooms alone, though not of great variety, can be brought to you—where you might live out the rest of your days less lonely than here. For there I shall visit you frequently, and I will tell you of this place while you, in return, can freshen for me the memory of your own world. But now be quiet. You are not well. Cold, hunger and exhaustion have taken their toll of you. Rest easy while we go, that I might inform you of some things you should know …

I closed my eyes again then, laughing weakly and mumbling in my delirium. "My God!—to hold a conversation with a dream—to receive succour from a vision …" Then an idea occurred to me. "Are we going to Lh-yib?"

For a second the creature paused and the gently flowing motion of my body through air ceased. I kept my eyes closed.

"You are a very learned man," the voice slowly said. "Yes, we are going to Lh-yib … but understand, that city is forbidden to you. Only the Thuun'ha and others—that is, others of my kind—dwell there. You will see the city from on high, but never try to regain its ramparts once we have crossed them over. The Thuun'ha would destroy you; for your likeness is as the likeness of those who dwelt in Sarnath … and the men of Sarnath knew no descendants …"

IX: The Creature's Story
Dream-Phase Three

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

"When this world was young—" the thing called Bokrug presently told me, striding with me in his arms effortlessly down that corridor along which I had seen his approach, my ancestors and their servitors the Thuun'ha came from their own dying world to settle here …"

“I know!” I said, breaking in deliriously on the being’s narrative: “*Lo, they came down from the Moon one Night in a Mist; lo, they and the Lake and Ib; and there did they worship Bokrug, the great Water-Lizard …*”

“Yes, that is how the coming was seen by certain primitives of the time; but in fact those ancestors did not come from the moon,” he corrected me. “No, they came from far beyond the moon. Their journey had been long and they knew that to begin their civilization again here in this new world would be hard. The plan was to settle in two regions, one in the east of this planet and the other toward the west. So Ib was raised in the eastern deserts, at a place where the instruments of my race told of vast amounts of water below the sands, and Lh-yib, the Sister City, was planned to be built at the place where the moors now grow wild and desolate above.

“But while the building of lb was easy, with none but a handful of wandering, ape-like tribesmen ever stumbling over its location in the great desert, the construction of Lh-yib presented serious problems. For one thing the land here was fertile, where already ferocious warrior clans warred to fence in and domesticate the mammoth—clans that later divided the land and gave their holdings names such as Nathis, Cimmeria and Gun-hlan—and it was seen that these peoples, particularly the early Cimmerians who were true barbarians, would not allow such as my ancestors and the Thuun’ha to remain unmolested in anything other than a fortress; and those fathers of my race on Earth were not disposed to build a garrison of that sort. Then the instruments of those ancestors discovered for them far underground a series of tremendous caves and hollows, carved by time and capable of supporting—not without certain difficulties—our civilization. And thus was Lh-yib eventually builded down here away from the sun, and the surface lands were left to be ruined by the grazing mammoth and the warring clans ..

At this point in his tale Bokrug paused, coming to a halt in a part of the tunnel that he obviously recognized. There he directed me to look at something resting upon a natural ledge worn in the side of the passage. At first I had difficulty making out what the thing was, but as the cloud of fire about my doubtful rescuer’s head descended to the level of the ledge, I saw that the object of the lizard-thing’s interest was a rotting harness with twin air-bottles and an arrangement of valves—an aqualung, as used by ocean divers and certain daring speleologists.

“You are not the first of your kind to find the way to Lh-yib,” the creature told me. “Others were here before you …”

I thought back on the report I had read in the police station at Bleakstone—of those cavers who had tried to navigate the rushing waters of Devil’s Pool—and I shuddered …

Tirelessly the creature then commenced once more to stride out, and I lay back again to listen as he continued the story of the history of his race:

“... But while Lh-yib has lain safe here in the bowels of Earth for twenty thousand years, lb, in its eastern desert, suffered destruction in less than half that time, at the hands of an Arab race that settled on the farther shore of the lake which my ancestors had forced from the desert’s depths. My peoples foresaw the massacre, taking steps to visit revenge on their prematurely triumphant murderers—and a doom came to the city of Sarnath such as no doom ever before known in all the lands of men. Now Lh-yib is the last seat of my race, and I and my brothers and our servants are faced with a different problem: one which threatens to swallow us even as lb was swallowed by those doomed men of Sarnath.

“For even now men of the surface world—of your own kind—plan the drilling of great wells in the moors, and we fear that such interference may well bring about cataclysms which we could not hope to survive. They search for gasses and oils, your brothers, little knowing that an ancient and honourable civilization flourishes here in these caves of rock. It is fortunate indeed for your surface-dwelling brothers that our original sciences are all but forgotten …

“Though I once tried, I have since seen the futility of attempting to beg a cessation of such experimental drilling for even were it presented with irrefutable proofs, your race is so narrow—minded as to refuse them; and if your peoples *could* be convinced … then such convictions would only make them ambitious of learning Lh-yib’s secrets.

“As our ancestors in distant, ancient Ib waited for the destruction they knew was coming, so must we wait in Lh-yib—yet there is still hope that the plans of your brothers on the surface might be abandoned. That would be a blessing.

“But there, soon we shall come to the Sister City! Can you walk now? If so then follow close behind me and do not speak; it is not seemly that I should be heard conversing with one such as you, nor would it be right for a

god to be seen slavishly bearing in his arms a creature moulded in the likeness of Ib's ancient foes."

As the creature spoke he lowered me to my feet. I looked ahead—beyond the being called Bokrug and along the tunnel to where a light faintly showed—then followed closely in his tracks as he made for that light.

The darkness quickly dispersed, so that soon even the glowing halo over the lizard—thing's head dimmed and seemed to vanish …

X: Lh-yib
Dream-Phase Four

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thoppon*]

Stumbling closely on Bokrug's heels, I emerged from the tunnel onto a tremendous, steeply terraced escarpment overlooking a cavern whose proportions were quite literally unbelievable. My first sight of the fantastic city beneath the moors was breathtaking. In one instant I thought of Pellucidar, of Mu and drowned Atlantis before those places sank, and of a dozen other such fabled cities of myth and fancy, yet could find little in anything I had read to compare with this!

When I say 'first sight', I do not wish to convey the idea of that sight coming to me immediately after I left the tunnel: no, for at first I was blinded by the brilliance of a light so bright in comparison with that darkness in the cave of the mushrooms as to make me certain that I had somehow been miraculously transported back to the waking, surface world. But then, as my eyes grew more accustomed to the glare, I saw that this was not so, and even the wonders of the city itself could not fully hold my eye as I surveyed in awe the immensity of the domed cave wherein that city reared its towers and parapets.

It was as if I stood on the steps of an amphitheatre of the gods. Behind me, to right and left, great tiers of stone—hewn slabs sloped up and back, steplike, to a height of at least two hundred feet, there to join with the towering, inward curving higher walls; and in front, reaching forward and steeply down, those same steps—broken here and there by stone—balustraded balconies and wide, sweeping landings—plunged another two hundred feet to a great floor that must have been all of a mile across.

Spanning this subterranean vista, stretching in what seemed to me a rather precarious splendour, great grey bridges arched from wall to terraced wall; some of them obviously wrought by nature, others—grafted in places to enormous stalactites depending from the dizzy ceiling—plainly artificial though of unknown architecture.

The centrepiece of this awesome scene was nothing less than fantastic. What could only be the world's greatest stalactite hung from the apex of the titan—spiked ceiling, meeting with an upthrusting stalagmite of equally tremendous proportions looming from the centre of the city itself. Even at the 'narrow' point where these two primeval pillars met, the diameter of the column they formed could have been no less than one hundred feet; and all the way up the length of that vast column—adorning its vertiginous sides—lines of small, square—cut windows peeped out from behind supported balconies, showing that even within that phenomenal freak of nature lesser builders had been at work …

The city itself was of grey stone, with tall, narrow buildings and spires, many of them forming supports for the spindly—looking bridges, rearing dizzily up towards the cavern roof. Smaller bridges cojoined many of those buildings, with jutting balconies defying gravity at every hand, and from each edifice small windows looked out over the city in general.

One structure stood quite apart from the city proper; a great pyramidal thing, drawing my eye in wonder of its purpose. A small stream passed under the base of the strangely enigmatic pyramid, to wander unrestricted—yet altered in colour to a deep green—from that place and across the plain to a spot where it vanished into the wall at the right of the cavern.

I traced the streamlet back from the building to its source, seeing that it sprang from high in the step—hewn wall to my left, down a concourse cut to contain its flow, to the plain below. Even as I watched, silver fish leapt in the sparkling water plunging down the steep channel. I stared again at the great pyramid.

"The Place of Worship!" the lizard—thing said, as if reading my thoughts. "Come."

He led me to the right and upwards, climbing the steps until the arched tunnel of entry lay below, then made for one of the natural bridges whose nearest root stemmed from the perpendicular wall some three hundred yards away. From what I could see at that distance, no steps led up to the bridge's broad back, yet I seemed to sense that Bokrug intended we should cross the

cavern by that means. Also, the bridge, unlike many of the others, had no parapets that I could see; and, hastily scanning its length, I saw with alarm that it narrowed frighteningly toward its centre!

Now, the creature leading me on might well have the agility of a mountain goat and an equally unshakable balance, I did not know … but *I* simply did not have a head for heights. Indeed, the mere *thought* of a fall from that dizzy aerial pathway, through over three hundred feet of thin air to the spires or streets of the greystone city below, was one which made my stomach turn over!

However, I relaxed somewhat as we passed over a wide landing and began to descend the steps, until, with the curve of the fearsome bridge looming fifty feet above us, we again made a turn to the right. There, cut back into the stone, another tunnel led into darkness.

Once more I was reduced to stumbling in the wake of that halo of alien light marking the lizard—thing's route; but after many rising, spiralling turns and twists, we settled down to a straight if somewhat upward course which somehow filled me with an odd uneasiness. True, my sense of direction had never been reliable (and, taking into account the winding path I had followed in the darkness, that sense might now safely be reckoned to be knocked even more out of phase), yet I could not rid myself of the crazy idea that this new direction in which we headed *lay straight out over the city-floored abyss!* I put this unfounded—indeed, impossible—notion away in the face of other, more puzzling problems.

Somehow it came quite naturally to me to question the strange figure of my own dreams and imaginings now striding out so, well, *positively* along the narrow, climbing corridor in front of me: "How is it that Lh-yib has daylight—or whatever light it is? What's the source?" The answer came back immediately:

"The atmosphere of the great cave is filled—tenuously, so as not to be blinding—with a living, gaseous, light-producing organism: the same … *material* … that my brothers and I wear above our heads in individual provision of light. An example is the nimbus which lights our path now!"

"One organism?" I questioned, puzzled by this apparent blunder of my divided, yet until now ordered even in division, psyche.

"Yes, one organism—and yet many! Polypous, you might say. It is a by-product of an experiment performed by a great race even before we and the Thuun'ha came to Earth; and we, like that race before us, have learned to

harness it to our own needs. Not that the Thuun'ha require light—they are equally at home in the dark—but we have lighted their city even as Ib flourished in the natural light of its eastern oasis, as a monument to that long-dead seat of worship …"

"*Their* city? Then Lh-yib belongs to the Thuun'ha?"

"Certainly—did Thor dwell in Oslo, or Tanwahi in Atlantis? The city is of little real use to us, except to provide the Thuun'ha a basis for their worship. They believe us to be gods; have done so—in this world and others—for hundreds of thousands of years. We have no wish that it should be otherwise."

"A million-year confidence trick—" I mused out loud. "How do you carry it off?"

As I said this the illumined, greenly—silhouetted creature quickly turned on me. He was frowning and his eyes glittered angrily. In that moment, dream or none, I knew that I was in the presence of a life-form far superior in every way.

"The Thuun'ha need us to no less a degree than your primitive forbears required their sun-gods. We are to them, in their limited spheres, as great a source of inspiration as have been and are the great deities of Earth to your species. Without their water-lizard gods they would have nothing to live for; and conversely, what is a god without his worshippers? We supply one another our needs. It is sufficient …" Without more ado he turned and again took up the eerie march along the gradually rising corridor.

More questions surged into my mind, demanding answers, but I held them back for the moment lest I perhaps further infringe on the lizard-thing's congeniality. In any case I was somewhat distracted, had been for some little time, by a steadily increasing visibility in the tunnel hinting of an early emergence. Indeed only a little way further, when we had covered perhaps one third of a mile on our straight, rising course, we came to a flight of a dozen or so rough-hewn steps leading up to an open, lighted area. It was only on mounting those steps that I knew the truth—that for once my meagre sense of direction had not led me astray!

I saw immediately that we were still in the great cavern (to both sides magnificent depending stalactites merged with soaring, windowed spires of rock or precariously arching bridges), but the proximity of the weirdly-adorned ceiling and the *level* at which I surveyed those topmost ramparts of the city could bring only one vertigo—inducing conclusion!

We were standing on the back of that great natural bridge I had feared to cross—and the tunnel behind us had been carved through the solid rock of the wider root of that span …

A narrow, shallow, groove—like track, no more than two feet in width by six inches deep, had been cut down the centre of the bridge's upper surface as a basic pathway, but not even a handrail guarded the naked edges of that path. And looking further ahead, maybe two hundred yards to the centre of the span proper, I could see that the width of the entire structure narrowed to no more than six feet or so, with the sides of the bridge falling away in a steep curve from the rudimentary walkway to the empty air beneath!

Why, crossing that section of the span, one would be able to look down at a steep angle onto the buildings almost directly below! Vertigo grabbed me then, squeezing me tight in its trembling fist, causing a momentary return of the rushing, tumbling sensation I had known at Devil's Pool, and I went shakily to my knees in sick protestation.

Down there, crouching on the solid stone, where the edges of the bridge did not seem quite so close, my head cleared quickly and the roaring went out of my ears. I looked up. Bokrug was staring at me in strange, cold concern. From where I kneeled he was silhouetted against a stark background of stalactites, seeming for all the world to be standing on a great rough tongue within a mighty mouth of teeth about to snap shut. I shook my head weakly: "I *can't go* across there!"

"Close your eyes and offer no resistance. I will carry you," the creature told me. "It will only be for a minute or so, then you should be able to walk the rest of the way …"

"*No!*—no, I can't …" I babbled unashamedly, backing away on all fours. The lizard-thing took four quick steps toward me, flat hands reaching out—

There came an enormous blackness … in which I drifted free … awash in soothing anaesthesia …

I do not know what the creature did to me, but whatever it was I came out of it far too soon. At first I stayed quite still, fearing the result of any unexpected activity on my part; for the supple, swaying motions I felt beneath me made it obvious that Bokrug was as good as his word. He was carrying me across the yawning abyss, over that narrow strip of nature—carved rock! Then sensing a tightening of his grip on me and believing myself about to be sat down, I opened my eyes—

Fortunately the sight froze me rigid, for the consequence of any movement I might have made at that instant was unthinkable. I was being carried in the ‘fireman’s lift’ position, slumped across the green creature’s back face down—yet my very first thought was that I was actually free and falling! For though at this, its thinnest point, the bridge must have been somewhat wider and sturdier than I had at first calculated, it had plainly been worked upon in anticipation of a grafting with some planned building—and I gazed in pure horror straight through the two—feet square jointing—hole cut *vertically* through its thickness, down at the points of the spires below and farther yet … to the narrow streets of the Sister City!

I do not believe I closed my eyes, there was no need, no time; in fact in a single instant there was … nothing! My mind seemed simply to shut down—went, as it were, into neutral…

My next—conscious?—thought, came when I felt my face being slapped by the flat, firm fingers of the green dream—being. I put up my hands to protect myself and the universal blur which everything was slowly cleared, outlines sharpening, until my vision—and apparently my other senses—returned to normal.

I found myself slumped at the edge of a wide landing, with the amphitheater—like steps of the great cavern's outer perimeter marching down from my position to the plain and the city below. Nearby, the natural bridge flung its fearsome arm out over those hideous heights which Bokrug had somehow crossed with me across his shoulders. I shuddered involuntarily as I saw again in my mind's eye the sight I had seen through that hole in the bridge.

Then, detecting an impatience in my weird companion's attitude, I managed to sit up. “A few minutes more and I’ll be all right,” I said, but the weakness of my voice belied its message.

“That is as well, for it will soon be the Time of the Mist,” the creature told me. “You must not be here when that time comes. For then the cavern fills with fumes which to you would be poisonous; but they are necessary to the well—being of the Thuun’ha.”

“The Thuun’ha! You keep mentioning them—and you say Lh-yib is their city—yet so far I haven't had a glimpse of any other single living thing … not even there!” I pointed down the steps and across the plain to the Sister City. “Just where are the … the Thuun’ha?”

“They are at worship: it is the Time. But soon it will be the Time of the Mist. Now, can you walk? Then come.”

I climbed unsteadily to my feet. “I can try to walk! Lead on.”

“Good.”

He led off then, fairly loping up the steps to the left in what I took to be unnecessary haste, heading for a dark entrance cut into the vertical rock face at the rear of the next landing up. I followed stumblingly, my legs weak, wearily climbing to the landing where Bokrug had paused to wait beneath the arch of the tunnel.

I had only a few more yards to cover across that flat space when I saw the creature’s posture alter. His interest—not in me but in something behind me, something down on the floor of the cavern—quickened, and for a moment he stared intently. Then he beckoned urgently, indicating that I should join him without delay.

“Come,” he called, “come *quickly!*”

I glanced back over my shoulder, turning to see better, when my attention was drawn to the pyramid—like building and its stream. In fact it was the stream primarily that caught my eye. From its bubbling source high in the wall of the cavern to the pyramid it ran and sparkled as before, but beyond that building its bed lay exposed and already drying.

And then I saw something else. From previously unnoticed holes in the apex of that strange pointed structure, a thick green mist was billowing silently out, rolling down the four smooth sides and rapidly blanketing the plain in all directions. In no more than ten seconds the mist had spread to the outermost buildings of the city, while in the other direction it already eddied about the feet of the curving perimeter steps.

A few seconds more saw Lh-yib’s lower quarters completely swallowed, with the green mist billowing about the foot of the steps directly beneath my vantage point. I knew I should do as Bokrug had bade me and go into the opening to join him there, but somehow those curling, rapidly flowing tendrils of green had me utterly hypnotized; I seemed to be pinned to the landing, with feet of lead, incapable of movement! The mist swept eerily upward, reaching for me—and then Bokrug’s arms closed about my waist, lifting me bodily and sweeping me into the tunnel in the wall of rock.

From perhaps twenty yards within that gloomy entrance we paused to look back, and there, where the tunnel opened into the cavern, an opaque green wall swirled threateningly, oddly luminous, mysteriously deadly.

“You see?” Bokrug said simply. “It is the Time of the Mist.” He pointed at the swirling wall of green. “Fortunately for you, at times such as this, the tunnels are made to breathe outwardly, so that the mist may not penetrate within them. Can you not even now feel the breathing of the tunnel?”

As he voiced his question I could indeed feel a rising breeze issuing from the unknown caves in the rock; and with this refreshing wind there came a sound, a throbbing, ululant echo, beautifully melodious yet utterly weird in its evocation of an alien choir, and I looked enquiringly, apprehensively, at the lizard—thing.

“The Thuun’ha,” he answered my unspoken question. “They offer their thanks, their praise, for the provision of the Mist of Life. As it was in Ib, so is it in Lh-yib, the Sister City!”

For a few moments longer the green creature stood there at my side, watching the silently swirling mist and listening to those ethereal ‘songs’; then, without another word, he turned and set off again, beckoning for me to follow.

Suddenly I felt completely fatigued and leaned myself against the wall of the tunnel. When only the strange halo showed, bobbing eerily away from me through the near—distant darkness, I managed to rouse myself from my weary torpor to follow as quickly as my leaden limbs would allow …

We covered most of the rest of the way—about a mile as I judged it, on a slightly downward course—without further talk, the silence only being broken when we came to a large, obviously artificial gallery. There I was led past a number of strangely inscribed tunnel entrances—and cautioned against ever attempting their exploration! I was ordered to shun one hole in particular, with the lizard—thing offering vague but dark hints of grim retribution should I ever disobey.

My only desire by then was to sleep (I was genuinely, terribly fatigued even knowing myself to be already asleep) and I did not bother myself to answer. Indeed, my weariness was such as to make me incapable of total comprehension, so that when finally my grotesque guide ushered me beneath one of the gallery’s archways, informing me that the cave within was to be my own personal quarter, I was only too pleased to sink down there and then in the darkness of Bokrug’s departure to pass almost immediately into deep, still slumbers within slumbers …

XI: Reflections in a New Environment

Dream-Phase Five

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

It is somehow hard for me now to try to describe my new ‘home’ in that strange cave leading off from the great gallery. There is a hazy patch in this particular area of my memory, which, like the haze that follows close on more orthodox dreams, threatens to blot out the sequence entirely. I remember that lining the walls there were diversely shaped, handy-sized patches of oddly resilient, fibrous, blossomless heather, of remarkably regular surfaces: apparently grown by nature to furnish beds, tables and chairs as proper-seeming and as comfortable to me as any I had known in the waking world.

I found myself on one of those ‘beds’ on rising from my exhausted sleep within that greater sleep, and if I had had any doubts whatsoever before of the fact that I was only dreaming or suffering incredibly detailed hallucinations, well, such doubts had obviously been unfounded. I knew this as soon as I saw the firefly cloud hovering with luminous familiarity above my head and lighting up in subdued but almost friendly phosphorescence all but the most secret corners of my cave. I had somehow ‘acquired’ a halo, exactly similar to that possessed by my Bokrug archetype.

Subsequent exploration led me to the discovery in a smaller adjoining cave of a pool of crystal water lying in a smooth—lined basin of stalagmitic rock. This basin had been formed by the constant dripping of water from the tip of one lone stalactite in the middle of the low ceiling. I remember how at first sight of the pool, with my face mirrored darkly in a patch of reflected firefly light, I became aware of yet another progression of my fantastic dream—state. For I had a beard and moustache, and I found it amazing that my mind could so ‘rationalize’ as to create for me these ‘natural’ alterations in my dream—physiognomy. Likewise my clothes were soiled and tattered and I had lost my shoes. I remembered having had my shoes in that earlier part of the sequence at the cave of the mushrooms. And all this, I conjectured, was but the delirious fruit of my fever; while, in all probability, I was still asleep at The George or, at worst, motionless on some specialist’s couch in Harley Street—‘in a condition of extreme shock and nervous exhaustion …’

Further exploration only went to substantiate the extent of my mental degeneration, for even natural body-functions had not been overlooked in the great hallucination, and I found a small-mouthed pit with a raised rim—looking like a small crater or blowhole—in that corner of the main cave most removed from the resilient beds of etiolated heather. So … I could wash and answer the calls of nature … but what of food? The lizard-thing had said I would be brought food, and having checked my cave over and discovered all there was to know of it, suddenly I found myself hungry.

I believe that it was while I was taking my first wash in the oddly—warm water of the rock-basin that I sensed a presence in the main cave. By the time I returned through the low, natural doorway to my "living-room", my visitor—whoever or whatever—had gone; but resting upon one of the higher, flat-topped, heather-like clumps of growth I found a laden platter. Well, perhaps *laden* is not the best word; but at least the platter contained food of sorts. There were three poached fish, each about six inches long and quite fat, and half-a-dozen small mushrooms. The platter was garnished with what looked like greyish lettuce. It was the first real food I had taken in—how long? I remember eating the lot with relish.

After my meal I sat on one of the beds and thought one or two things out. To the best of my knowledge at that time, a meal taken in a dream could not possibly be *physically* satisfying, and yet I actually knew the feeling of satisfaction! Could it be that this was my dream-interpretation of a parallel occurrence in the real world? Supposing for a moment that I was in a coma of sorts, under care somewhere—in a hospital, for instance—and supposing further that I was being regularly fed intravenously or by some other means. It would be a simple matter for a mind as far gone as mine to interpret the feeling of well-being derived from such feedings as being actual hunger-relief sensations brought on by *feeding myself* on the fare of this cavern-world. This was a conclusion I could well accept, but I did not like to dwell on the same theory as applied to my answering the calls of nature! Someone, somewhere, must be finding in me a very difficult charge indeed! But of course, all that was sheer guesswork.

And yet (I told myself desperately), my mind must at least be attempting to hold on to a degree of rationality. Otherwise I would not now be able to make these … well, these rationalizations!

I went back to square one, right back to my accident, dwelling in detail on the things that had happened to me since.

Surely this prolonged dream, or sequence of connected dream-hallucinations, was no more fantastic than that other dream I had known on my first night in Bleakstone, when I had completely relived three years of my earlier life in one single night! And surely there could be no stranger nightmare than that I had known when the fossilized bones had taken on living flesh before my eyes? And what of my earlier symptoms following hard on the accident, when my mind used to blank completely? On those occasions (I tried to console myself), I had been far worse off than now, for then at times my brain had literally ceased to function; whereas now, horrible though the experiences were, at least I did know experiences! Better to dream and be aware of it than to wander mindlessly as I had on that occasion when I had thought to go rock-hounding!

Often after that first time—in the 'days' that followed—I would sit in my mind-cave and ponder the strangeness of it all. But at other times my lonely ponderings were relieved by the presence of a visitor, Bokrug, keeping his word (or obeying the instructions of my errant Id), coming to talk to me of the waking world and other things, and to bring me food.

Even about these visits I had my own ideas: was the lizard-being in fact a doctor, a psychiatrist, taking me back purposely along the paths of my past in a medically acceptable attempt to correct the malfunctions of my psyche?

During one session with Bokrug, I asked him to explain in greater detail the origin of the underworld's strange lighting—system.

"As I have said," he began, "the tiny, living motes that comprise these nimbuses above our heads and part of the atmosphere in the great cave, are what you call polypous. They are in fact basic life-tissues, from which, under the right conditions, all sorts of species and forms of life might spring." He paused to peer closely at me. "You are learned—do you know anything of the *Ubbo-Sathla Cycle*?"

"It rings a bell," I answered, "and yet I can't say I specifically *remember* having heard or read anything of it. What is this cycle—a mythological contemporary of the Cthulhu Cult or something of that nature?"

"Ah! Then you have heard of Loathly Lord Cthulhu? Yes, probably you have come across Ubbo-Sathla in the same connection. Well, Ubbo-Sathla is reputed in myth to have been the source of all Earthly life; according to certain books I know to exist in the surface world, Ubbo-Sathla '*spawned the grey, formless efts of the prime, and the grisly prototypes of terrene life.*'

The story goes on to explain: '*And all Earthly life shall go back at last through the great circle of time to Ubbo-Sathla.*' Well, it is my own opinion that this—" he passed his flat hand through the halo over my head, "and Ubbo-Sathla are one and the same; and that you, therefore, are a son of Shoggoth."

"Shoggoth!" I started, recalling those hideous dreams of old, in the nights following my glance into the pages of the *Necronomicon.* "Did you say Shoggoth?"

"Yes, for that is the name given their creation by its original makers—those Great Old Ones, here even before the Earth was fully formed, hundreds of millions of years ago. They called their protoplasmic creation 'Shoggoth-tissue', and from it carved themselves beasts of burden—to build their cities and perform their heavier duties—beasts that eventually evolved powers which made them extremely dangerous to the Old Ones. The Shoggoths grew ever more clever, more imitative, more ambitious and ever the more sullen, until a time some one hundred and fifty million years ago when they turned in a great uprising on their masters. That the Old Ones managed to subdue them was a mercy …

"When we and the Thuun'ha settled here in these caves, we discovered—well, a cache of primal Shoggoth-tissue, still living, but in a form harmless as a shoal of lowly amoebas. We created many strains of simple life from this source—the light-clouds are but one form—but as with the Old Ones, so with us. Our slave-cultures quickly developed powers of their own, until we were forced to destroy them. Now, save for this "lighting-system", as you call it, and for one other form, Lh-yib and its precincts are completely free of Shoggoths."

"One other form?" I repeated him, making it a question.

"Yes, more truly a *Shoggoth,* as pictured in tortured nightmares by certain sensitive dreamers in the surface world. It serves a purpose here—a necessary *function*—and it is in no position to threaten our existence. In the perpetual, barren environment in which we keep it, there exists no opportunity for … learning! It has reached its peak."

"But where is this thing?" I demanded to know. "Is it possible I might be allowed to … to see it?"

The lizard-creature studied me gravely for a moment before answering: "If you keep my ordinances, you will never have reason to see it—that I

promise you—and I pray you never *shall* see it, for that would be your end …”

After this conversation, in my next five or six ‘sleep’ periods, I had recurrent nightmares involving Shoggoths; iridescent blackness, the living excreta of nameless, alien super-creatures; viscous agglutinations of bubbling cells, churning and surging through subterrene tunnels like sentient mucus in a cosmic sinus.

The worst of these nightmares saw me in a great pit with a twenty-foot statue of a water-lizard god. The floor of the place was littered with bones, many of them covered with an evil-smelling black slime—a slime that I somehow knew to be the ‘snail-trail’ of a Shoggoth—and even as I shrieked and frantically tried to climb out of that awful pit, I could hear the rumble of an approaching something; a something that sent before it a smell so noxious and alien as to make my senses reel from the incredible assault. A jagged hole led into the pit from somewhere down below, and it was from this hole that the smell belched, ever thicker, ever stronger; and it was from this hole that I knew the horror must soon burst in all its monstrous unreality …

After dreams such as this it was good to ‘wake’ and find myself still in my now friendly, comfortable cave. But in a little while these terrible nightmares ceased and eventually there came a time when for all the lizard—thing’s visits, and for all my ponderings and ‘rationalizations’, I grew heartily sick of the cave and its appointments. Why, the place was no less than a prison, a cage evolved of my own diseased imaginings! And yet, having created the barriers, might I not as easily tear them down?

That was how my wanderings in the subterranean world first began, and soon they became regular excursions, so that after every three or four resting-periods (those times when I ‘slept’ on my heather bed) I would be taken by the urge to get out of the cave and explore a little further along the unknown tunnels.

At first I used to worry about what would happen if my firefly familiars should ever leave me, but after a while, when I saw just how faithfully that luminous cloud kept its place above my head, I lost this fear; and then my wanderings became extensive, and in spite of the warning of the lizard-being I took to exploring those passages down which he had specifically ordered me never to venture.

I could only believe later that the ‘warning’ of Bokrug had been my own subconscious reluctance to let myself delve any further down those channels of my mind where Aberration had its strongest hold. Certainly there were far more fearsome places in this dream—world than my comparatively comfortable cave. Just how fearsome I was yet to discover …

XII: Singers of Strange Songs
Dream-Phase Six

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

Throughout all my dream-adventures ‘underground’ from that time on, within the cave appointed me by the lizard-being or in … other places … periodically I would hear—sometimes quite clearly as if from near at hand, at other times distantly, a mere murmur in my inner ear—strange songs of ululant praise from somewhere in this subterranean complex of my mind. I spent quite a lot of time during the earlier ‘days’ of my entombment wondering about the real source of those sounds; for of course I knew they did not issue (as my Bokrug archetype had had it) from the worshipful minions of the water-lizard gods: Bokrug and the like being non-existent except in my own chaotic brain. The sounds were purely imaginary, as was everything else, and no end of puzzling could do me any good; but in any case, they provided me an interesting point of contemplation and conjecture.

I would rouse from fretful dreams or rare hallucinations to their soulful, often elf-like timbre, and at other times I would start from the desolate byways of sprawling Hypochondria on hearing the commencement of a new phase of those throbbing—hymns?

With the passage of some time it grew on me that whatever the sounds were they never heralded any change in my environment (I used to fear at first that they were the harbingers of more hideous things to come or even deeper depths of mental degeneration), and with that realization came a stronger urge to rationalize and at least seek some scientific, if incorrect, theory as to their origin.

I had in fact ‘rationalized’ on many things—Bokrug I had seen first as an archetype, as in C. G. Jung, then as a doctor; my presence in this cthonian

dream had obviously come about through my deep interest in the possibility that the figurine at Radcar had originated in just such a place; the fever-inducing ‘mushrooms’ represented an attempt by some subconscious Me to explain away my decidedly opiatic condition, etc., etc! But these sounds were something else.

It could only be, I told myself, that my mind had started to dig out all sorts of obscure bits of information on subterranean subjects from things I had read long ago (and long ago thought forgotten), and that to make my dream-state more complete was inserting these bits and pieces into the greater hallucination.

And this theory fitted in well in respect of certain things I could actually remember having read or heard about caverns. For example: those sounds—

Yes, I had read how strange noises or echoes sometimes issue, even to the surface, from deep underground. Miners in England's north-east coal mines—probably in other regions—quite religiously record and act upon supposed indications of the conditions of their pits coming to them in the form of underground grumblings and groanings, and sometimes even throbbings and whistles. Certain noises convey to them especially bad omens, and it is not unknown for them to refuse to work a shaft which does not behave itself in this respect. In antiquity cavern oracles were frequently consulted, usually by sibyls, and the Cumaean sibyl was most celebrated for her trance—interpretations of ‘noises’ from the bottom of her cave. Other oracular springs, grottoes and potholes existed everywhere in the Old World, and in Morocco there are still caves where people sleep in the hope of seeing visions believed to be indicative of their futures; visions influenced by the ‘spirit voices’ echoing from unknown vaults beneath. In fact there is a legend in Morocco, in regard of one particularly active cavern, wherein it is told a marriage procession once took refuge from a storm. There the members of the procession became transformed into stone, but today people swear they can still hear the songs, chattering and general gaiety of that long-gone entourage.

Norbert Casteret, perhaps the greatest of all speleologists, has written of a certain ‘Magic Flute’ phenomenon, when he has heard strange, melodious music underground; and has explained the mystery away in observing its origin: drops of water, falling from a height into hollow, flute-like channels and tubes—tubes formed by the very droplets themselves!

So then, with all these odd facts and bits of knowledge floating about in my delirious head, was it really so strange that having ‘dreamt’ myself underground in the first place I should now imagine myself to be hearing those queerly disturbing ‘songs’?

No, it was not so strange; indeed, in my state, it was acceptable—*had* to be acceptable!—*provided that my mind did not carry its fancies too far!* But suppose I should conjure up for myself the Thuun’ha “in the flesh”, as it were? I dreaded the thought of finding myself confronted by creatures the like of those described on the *Brick Cylinders of Kadatheron*—for any singers of songs such as those I had heard must be very strange singers indeed …!

XIII: The Calcium Labyrinth
Dream-Phase Seven

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

On one occasion (I am reduced to the use of this term by the fact that without any means of measuring time—and immersed as I was constantly in this long, fantastic dream—I was left completely disorientated regards the hour, the day, the week, even the month at any specific dream-moment) I wandered in a direction which I had never taken before. I branched off down strange tunnels, ever leaving my mark on entrance and exit walls, until I came to an area of that underground world literally honeycombed with caves, holes and burrows of sizes varying from the merest rat-hole, through many intermediary grades, to great yawning orifices of about fifteen feet in diameter.

Closer inspection of the walls in this place brought me to a startling and awe-inspiring conclusion. At some time in the remote past there had existed here an unthinkably vast cavern of comparatively low ceiling but tremendous width and length—perhaps a titanic ‘split’ between layers of primeval bedrock—and water seepage over countless aeons had formed stalactites and stalagmites, which depending and ascending projections of rock-hard calcium carbonate had eventually joined up to form the walls and pillars of the great maze through which I now wandered. Perhaps those very formations themselves had finally stemmed the flow of their own genesis; or had some other cause stopped the mineral-rich seepage from completely

filling in the tremendous cavity? I could not say, but certainly the place had seen no moisture for many, many centuries. A fine dust lay between the columns, though where this substance had its origin I was likewise unable to guess, and its surface was so even that my footprints made quite clear tracks behind me. It was this fact that caused me to put away my lump of chalky rock. It seemed pointless to mark my route when each step I took left a clear ‘spoor’ by which to make an eventual return …

How far I wandered through that weird calcium labyrinth must remain purely a thing of conjecture. If my time-sense—even dreaming—had been disorganized before, why, now it suffered devastation in those white-walled centuried caves! The silence was so complete (for some reason the magnificent maze was void of echoes) and the lure of unseen caves ahead and seemingly interminable powder—floored passages lulled my mind into an uneasy dullness of thought ignoring time completely.

I was shaken from this stupefaction, this phase of mindless wandering, by suddenly feeling on my face and arms the coolness of a slight draught; a breeze which grew rapidly by leaps and bounds to a wind, a gale forcing my tattered shirt and raggy trousers against me, pushing me irresistibly along the calcium corridors against all my efforts to resist. In a matter of seconds I was stumbling, then running, lurching wildly from wall to wall, blinded and choking in the clouds of dust swirling up from the floor into my eyes and nostrils. Once, in Cyprus, I had been caught in a dust-devil, and now I knew something of that experience again; but this time, rather than a phenomenon of scientific interest, the thing was horrifying, indeed, a threat to my life! Now I knew whence came those passage-refreshing winds at the Time of the Mist, when, as Bokrug had had it, “the tunnels are made to breathe outwardly …”

Then, when it seemed there was no air left in the whole of that hideous underworld, as I clawed at my tortured throat and eyes in an agony of suffocation, the wind dropped as quickly as it had risen and the dust again settled toward the floor.

As rapidly as that it was over. I could breathe again. My nimbus of living light re-formed itself above my head and, as my breath came more easily, so my position was more clearly illumined. For as I gathered my buffeted senses, crouching there against the calcium wall for support, I began to realize the horror of my situation. Not a single footprint remained in the freshly settling dust to hint of my whereabouts or of the path I must take to

regain the cavern I had made my home. I who had been so vastly amazed by the variety of form and size of the myriad openings around me, now feared them in a like degree.

Which one?—which of these hundreds of aeon—formed doorways offered a safe return to sanctuary? And beyond that first as yet unknown gate, how many more possible combinations of routes must lie within the incredibly complex maze between me and the comparative friendliness of my secluded chamber?

Terror and panic soon defeated logic. After a pause of only a minute or so I began to walk the dusty, silent corridors, then to run, until I left my guardian cloud of St Elmo's fire behind, stumbling blindly along in a gloom which might well have existed undisturbed from a time predating the mammoth; and in so doing I came as close and closer than ever before to subterranean disaster!

Seconds after the last dancing motes of living light had receded behind me, leaving me lurching along in a midnight panic—flight, I bumped roughly into an unseen wall, careened over a projection jutting up from the floor and fell sprawling, with all the remaining wind knocked from me, full length in the dark. As my reeling senses steadied I found that my right arm, which I had flung protectively before me, and my head, hung limply, unsupported in empty space. As I have told before, I have never been much of a one for heights, so that the sight that slowly unfolded as my cloud of fireflies gathered ranks once more above me caused me to cringe in fear and wriggle desperately backwards away from the yawning chasm into which I had almost plunged.

I had emerged from the calcium labyrinth on to a vast ledge extending to right and left as far as the light from my fiery familiars reached, and beyond which descended with stark, sheer sides, a great black hole going down to unguessed depths.

Curious despite my fear, I edged slowly forward on my stomach until my eyes again peeped over the lip of the chasm; and then, for the first time, I remembered and attempted to use an *ability* that Bokrug had once told me would be mine to command, which I had not yet had occasion to experiment with. I simply squeezed my mind, concentrating, ordering the brightly glowing halo to desert me and descend into the abyss.

And it worked!

So! This told me something at least—that my mind was fully capable of supporting its own fictions!

I forced the glowing cloud down, down into the unknown pit, and the solid dark of the cave-world settled like a shroud about me, so that but for the feel of the hard rock beneath my body I might well have imagined myself a spirit floating free in the vacuous voids of space. Equally ultimate was the silence, with the only sound to disturb that singular stillness being the unsteady beating of my own heart—or was that, too, merely my imagination? Often I was to ponder that possibility; that I was in fact dead, a troubled soul wandering alone in a personal and private Phlegethon …

After what seemed a long while, when the light from the cloud still receding into the depths had become nothing more than a dim glow far, far down, I was on the point of calling a mental halt to my experiment when I was taken by an idea. I held the cloud stationary, where it was, while I groped with my hands around the lip of the chasm until I found a sharply projecting knob of stone. I managed to prise the stone free, letting it fall vertically from my fingers into the abysmal shaft. I began to count, but stopped to hold my breath in astonishment when I reached a score; yet it was not until some seconds *after* I stopped counting that the glowing speck below suddenly flew apart as the falling stone hurtled through its members!

I listened then, cupping my hand to my ear, and eventually a sound came to me. But it was not the sound of solid striking solid—it was a rush, a roar, a rising growl echoing up to me from regions undreamed of. *It was the magnified* sound *of the passage of that small stone … fleeing ever faster down the limitless depths … to the pits at Earth's very core!*

Shaken, in awe of immensities I had never before imagined as existing, oppressed, crushed and defeated in the recognition of my own insignificance, I let my neon nimbus drift slowly back to its appointment above my head, and then I wandered listlessly back along the way I had come.

It took me a very long time to find the first chalk mark in a tunnel entrance, and almost as long after that to make my way wearily back to my cave …

XIV: The Cave of White Grass
Dream-Phase Eight

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

On another occasion, wandering down yet another of those corridors pointed out to me by the lizard-thing as being forbidden to me, I eventually came out of a cavern-complex onto a vista so unnatural as to be hideous.

I had emerged into a large cave with a high ceiling, a ceiling spotted with glowing splotches of light, and the floor beneath my feet had turned from one of centuried dust to loam-rooted grass—grass which, excluded from any source of natural sunlight, had yet grown lush and thick … but white as death itself!

I had read somewhere of the existence of just such a monstrosity in the chasms of the Moroccan Atlas, deep below the surface; but here, observing the phenomenon for myself, I was appalled. Here was a small field—but growing in no wise as God had intended—trapped down here since seeded, reaching blindly through moist, dripstone-filtered loam towards a light devoid of the chlorophyll of the sane upper world—growing in monstrous lushness and ripening in pallid horror!

The white blades were soft beneath my feet, with the pliancy of fields remembered from years gone by; yet I shuddered inwardly as I walked silently across that alien terrain, forced against my will to recall a fragment from one of Clark Ashton Smith's poems:

> What clammy blossoms,
> blanch'd and cavern—grown….?

Then, at a place where the ceiling came down to only a foot or so above my head, I paused to scrape at one of the eerie patches of light, discovering the source of that luminescence to be a crust of lichen; a mass of tiny fronds, strangely cross-hatched and intricately threaded. Even as I examined that odd scrap of dream-cave-life, I felt the fall of a spot of moisture, quickly followed by a second and then a third, upon my head. I stepped back to peer upward in wonderment at the wounded lichen—apparently ‘bleeding’ from the area where I had scraped—and saw the reason for the stuff’s peculiar composition. The tightly intertwined fronds and rootlets formed a trap to catch the seeping water on which the plant fed.

I thought of the mushrooms; of the lizard-thing and the unseen, unknown Thuun’ha; of the fireflies above my head; of the etiolated heather-beds in my cave; and finally of this hideous cavern of white grass and the luminous

lichens on its ceiling, and was awed. This underworld, dream or hallucination though it must be, was none the less full of unending wonders and strange cycles of life …

I was still thinking on these bizarre things when I heard the noise. It was a … a rippling, as of corn in a breeze-driven field, a languorous swishing of foliage; but at the sound my hair stood on end and I lowered my eyes to stare in rising terror at the awful grass.

The whole field, over an area as far as I could see, was alive with motion —with the grass bending over in regular waves like the surface of a small sea, *but impelled by no wind!*—and in that same instant of time I knew that those grass-blades were somehow drawn to lean toward the fresh moisture dripping from the ceiling. Obviously the cave was not normally as moist as I had thought; this awful grass bent toward water as flowers lift their heads to the sun in the green fields above!

Suddenly a horror burst over me the like of none I had ever known before. I only knew I had to be out of that loathsome place, and I turned and ran for the archway of my entry. Then, glancing back over my shoulder as I left the field and entered the complex of caves, I saw a sight that froze the blood in my veins. For disturbed or alerted by my panic-flight, I knew not which, that entire monstrosity of inner-earth, that whole etiolated—meadow?—had swished into a new position; a position in which every tip of every blade of grass now pointed in my direction!

It required no more than a second's thought to discover the reason for this freakish and frightening activity—*that hellish herbage had 'sensed', by some means I could never hope to understand, the presence of* the *little rivers of cold sweat springing in spontaneous solicitude from my body's pores!*

I was still running when I reached my friendly little cave, and there I collapsed in shivering terror on my bed …

XV: The Frogs
Dream-Phase Nine

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

It was not until a long time after my adventure in the cave of white grass —or so it seemed to my shattered time-sense—that I dared put foot outside

my rightful appointments again. I did it after many ‘sleep’ periods, after as many repetitious sessions with the lizard-creature, and after heaven-only-knows how many boring, almost ritualistic meals of fish and fungi.

It was, of course, monotony that drove me out. In my more lucid moments (I mean at those times when my mental images, my dreams, were sharpest and most clearly defined), I had even attempted a little physical exercise in my cave, by the light of my ever—attendant fireflies; but even in this I had discovered ennui, so that in the end I determined to brave the cave of white grass again, and to go on from that place deeper into the calcium labyrinth.

I experienced no difficulty in rediscovering the cave of the morbid meadow, for I simply followed the marks on the walls as I recalled making them from my chamber to that awful place, but once there I knew many moments of dread and indecision before again committing myself to walk over that sea of leper-sprouting loam. In the end I decided simply to skirt the cavern, to move along the walls where the grass grew thinnest, until I found an exit place; there to take up my wanderings and markings again, until either hunger or weariness should drive me back to the boredom of my cave. This, not without much trepidation, I did, but not once did I notice any abnormal motion in that field of pallid grass, a fact that heartened me greatly and strengthened my resolve to explore further.

I left the lichen-ceilinged cavern at a spot, by my judging, roughly one third of the distance round its irregular perimeter from the cave of entry, choosing an archway of greater dimensions than the norm and finding the tunnel beyond it to be of corresponding spaciousness. I struck out, in a fairly straight line but yet on a course which after some time I decided must be a gradual descent into the deeper bowels of earth. At first this declivity was barely recognizable as such, but in a little while I noticed a slight pressure on my toes which told of my almost unconscious ‘braking' of stride against an increasing steepness of descent.

As I went lower I found that the rock floor beneath my feet (here there was no dust) grew damper and almost slimy; indeed, as the distance I covered increased, the way became slippery to the point of treacherous. Shortly I passed a series of small bore-holes, varying from the size of rabbit-burrows to openings into which a man might easily crawl, joining into the tunnel from a direction to my rear as I walked. Here then was the explanation for the sudden dampness of the place. Seepage, from

somewhere far above, was making its way down these sub-tunnels into this main passage. Sure enough, when I touched the mouth of one of the smaller burrows, drops of water gathered into a tiny pool round my fingers, before flowing in a visible trickle down to the damp floor of the passage. I moved on.

Soon, as the way grew yet steeper, I fancied that I heard ahead an indistinct rushing sound, increasing in volume as I went until the noise was quite audible, clearly recognizable as the rushing and pounding of tumultuous waters. I pressed on eagerly. Here indeed was a diversion! The sight of a subterranean waterfall, or perhaps of a resurgence from some lower level, would be balm to my tired eyes; the nerves of which must, I was sure, be slowly atrophying in the perpetual sameness of my environment.

Soon the dampness was also in the air, soothing to my dry throat, and the vibrations caused by the as yet unseen surgings somewhere ahead became such as to actually set the walls and floor of my tunnel trembling. A few minutes or so more saw me around a final bend in the descending passage to confront an awe-inspiring spectacle of subterrene grandeur.

A great shining spout of water was literally *erupting* from a high rock wall some eighty feet above, to cascade out and down into a swirling, rushing pool which in turn emptied itself mightily, in liquid haste, into a great fault in a distance-shadowed wall. Such was the turbulence of the water that the air was full of moisture, and water particles continually spattered against me.

My vantage point was from a rocky ledge onto which the tunnel had opened, about ten feet above the level of the pool, and there I threw myself belly down to watch in awe the majestic carom of water.

The *sound* was literally deafening, an explosion of noise as of a thousand thundering engines, a cacophony such as to put any ten steel-forging mills to shame, but I chanced the ruin of my eardrums gladly to be able to see the stupendous resurgence and to feel on my face the flung spray of this Chthonian cataract.

It was from this position that I first saw the second ledge at a level some eight feet beneath me, and as my firefly familiars descended to hover above me as I lay there they lit up to a degree the darker surface of that second ledge also. There were *shapes* down there and I knew immediately that I was seeing living creatures, though of what species I could not be sure.

There were dozens of them, of the general size of large house cats, and they seemed to spend their time darting ferociously, with bounding leaps and dripping, slippery cavortions, in and out of the treacherous pool. Then, as more of them leaped, I saw the sleekly shining extended rear legs, noting the strong webbing between the digits of those hind limbs, and I knew that the creatures were some outsize species of frog; but what on earth were they doing, frenziedly hurtling in and out of the rushing waters like that?

The answer came in a flash. I saw one of the frogs emerge from the churning surface of the water to leap to the ledge below me, and in his mouth he carried a flapping, shiny-scaled fish! The things were fishing! And of course, this would be the perfect place: a spot where the fish were dazed by the great fall of the water and the buffeting of powerful currents. So far as I could see the creatures were blind (as are many other forms of cavernicolous faunae), eyeless in fact, and it amazed me the powers of perception they must have achieved since their origin to be able to swim and fish so expertly in these unknown and unlit depths. So thinking, I leaned my head out further over the ledge in order to observe their actions more closely.

I must have disturbed some small, washed pebbles, of which a number littered the floor. Certainly I had felt something slide out from beneath my chest to fall from the ledge, but such was the racket put up by the spouting water and roaring pool that the sound of the dislodged pebbles striking the ledge below was hopelessly lost to me.

Not so the frogs!

If I had wondered at the development of their cavern senses before, I was utterly astonished now; for with one accord, as if commanded by a single governing brain or ganglion, the squatting batrachians stopped their feasting, the leapers quit their leaping, and in unison the entire horde turned to stare sightlessly up at me. Then, after a pause of no more than a second or so, they launched themselves *en masse* towards my position on the high ledge.

Ghastly terror threw me upright then, sent me flying—shrieking madly, sobbing and gasping between shrieks—up the slippery nightmare corridor of rock. Not merely because of the concerted attack of the giant frogs in their singular unison of monstrous intent; nor because of my apparent and shuddersome magnetism for both flora and fauna alike in this awful underworld—no, I fled for another reason; one which unmanned me and

terrified me almost beyond endurance. For as those dwellers in the depths had turned to me, the light of my friendly fireflies had been reflected in their faces—not from their eyes for they had no eyes—*but from great, sharp, curving fangs that gleamed whitely and dripped redly in their evil, wide—slit mouths …!*

The floor being so greasy my progress was nightmarishly slow, a pace with which my fireflies could easily cope as I plunged and slithered up the now seemingly interminable corridor; and having at last traversed that bend leading away from the cataract, I gazed fearfully back to see if the frog-things had managed to gain the ledge and follow me. From behind, above the now lowered din of the waterfall, came such sounds of slithering and hopping that I knew, even before the first of those toothy fishers flopped into sight around the bend, that any hope of mine of the passage being inaccessible to them had been in vain.

I waited no longer, but flung myself with all my energy up and along the corridor … and it was then that I found myself in what at first appeared a hopeless situation. For with a sudden rush and a roar, surging down the tunnel came a frothing gush of black water almost knee deep as I judged it; quite sufficient if it hit me in my present position to knock my feet from under me and send me flying back into the chomping fangs of my loathsome pursuers!

I had reached a point level with the lowest of those small adjoining burrows, and as the racing water rushed closer upon me and the slavering horde squelched and flopped behind, I hurled myself heedlessly, head and shoulders, into the barely adequate hole. My intention was to crawl completely into the cavity, but, horror of horrors, the burrow tapered down to a veritable mouse-hole in a distance of only a few feet!

Then, even as I felt the first slimy snatchings at my legs and winced at a leering mental picture of curving fangs and slavering jaws, the water hit; swirling and threatening to suck me out of the little cave, down to the lower ledge and the great pool below with its fearful, squamous feasters. I hung on for dear life, while the water rushed into my cave and filled it completely, pouring into my mouth and nostrils, ballooning my tattered trousers—my last vestige of clothing—and swilling away, perhaps for ever, my poor drowned fireflies.

I think I came close to drowning myself—certainly I lost consciousness, though probably only momentarily—for the last thing I remembered before

finding myself soaked and coughing, spread-eagled on the floor of the recently flooded shaft, was spreading my elbows and humping my back to jam myself against the sides and roof of my small and doubtful refuge. I had obviously been washed from that place, to be left high but not so dry about twenty yards lower down the tunnel.

As I climbed unsteadily to my feet there came to my ears a frantic flapping sound that caused me to gasp aloud and spin about, searching for the frogs which I felt sure must be near at hand. In my terror I hardly noticed the fact that my fireflies had not been drowned but were still there above my head as always; and it was by their light that I quickly discovered the source of the flappings which had so startled me—and also, incidentally, the reason my presence had had so disturbing an effect on the brutish batrachians. For the corridor was littered with still living fish, stranded now that the subterranean gusher had passed, and I could well understand why the fanged frogs had waited down by the pool for the first sounds of the obviously regular resurgence—sounds heralding the easy pickings of stranded fish! Inadvertently I had triggered that hellish response of theirs, when I knocked down the pebbles from the ledge. They had seen my intrusion as a harbinger of the anticipated feast to come!

But then I heard a sound other than the agonized flapping of stranded fish—a sound that steadily, nastily grew louder—and this time there could be no mistaking the vicious chomp and snapping of ghoulish gluttony, close and coming closer. It would not be long, I realized, before the great frogs had followed the trail of fish back up the shaft to me!

I wasted no more time but set off as quietly and quickly as I could back along the way I had come, towards the upper levels and the comparative safety and sanity of the better known passages above …

XVI: The Spawning Place
Dream-Phase Ten

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

There eventually came a time when I had all but used up the various exit tunnels from that great gallery of which my own cave was but a small cul-de-sac. That is, I had explored the great majority of them—most, as told, with terrifying or mind-staggering results! But boredom is a

tremendous force to be reckoned with, and the *utter* boredom of that small cave of mine would have been quite sufficient to drive the most timid soul (even forewarned by past events of possible disaster) out into the unknown underworld.

"Better the devil you know they say; but is it always true? I did not ever want to see the cave of white grass again, and the thought of the pool of fanged frogs was more than enough to cause my hackles to rise. Likewise, no amount of urging—had there been anyone to urge me—could have induced me to revisit the bottomless pit down which I had dropped a stone in the folly of believing that by that simple act I might gauge its depth! Nor was the idea of a fresh visit to the calcium labyrinth, with its suffocating winds of change, in the least attractive to me. No, it seemed that in order to stifle my yawning boredom I might be wiser to face the as yet unrealized 'devils' of those corridors which so far my feet had never known.

So it was, that with a piece of marking—rock tucked into a pocket of my almost completely shredded trousers, I entered the first of those remaining few tunnels branching off from the great gallery and began to make my cautious way into what was to eventually prove a new realm of nightmare.

It made no difference that this was that shaft especially pointed out to me by the dream-lizard as being forbidden above all others; indeed, I believe that his warning was in the main the special attraction!

But it was different, this great burrow, with none of the dryness of the calcium labyrinth, nor yet damp like the slippery declivity to the rushing pool of frogs; no, the atmosphere here seemed rather more, well, *livable*; or was it simply that I myself was becoming more conditioned to 'living' underground?

There were no side-tunnels leading off from this shaft, and when I gave closer examination to the walls I was led to the conclusion that time and nature were by no means wholly responsible for their mechanical regularity. There was no stalagmitic dripstone for one thing—and for another there were marks which could only have been the results of an extensive mining operation.

I had gone perhaps one half-mile along the tunnel, keeping to the main shaft and leaving alone the hundreds of smaller side-burrows, when I came to the steps. There were seven of them, cut into the solid rock (a sort of darkish basalt as opposed to limestone), leading me up to a level of the passage on a slightly higher elevation. That higher passage was of basalt,

too, having a slow but definite rise to its floor which made me unconsciously quicken my pace. It seemed the closer I got to the surface world, the nearer I came to the *waking* world, and the faster I wanted to go. Hah!—as if there could exist the slightest hope of my discovering a way out of my sprawling mind-prison …

It was only when I thought I heard something, a noise from somewhere ahead, that I slowed my pace. I stood still then to listen for a recurrence; and there was a sound, receding now but recognizable none the less.

It was one of those "songs of praise", as heard often before, echoing back to me from some distant region. I kept still, so that I might catch the last of those ephemeral notes; but too late, for the song had already died. Yet in its stead I seemed to hear an odd whispering, a muted, infinitesimal echo, as it were, of what had gone before—and strangely, again I was reminded of the voices of many young choir-boys, singing in unison in some great cathedral.

At first I told myself there could be little doubt that this muted harmony was only the fading echo of the greater sound; but as I wandered steadily on along the basalt passage, so the whispering seemed to grow louder (rather than dying out, as I had thought it might), until soon it was a distinctly audible, ululant hum in the air; an effect which might with some difficulty have been attained in more orthodox settings by playing in harmonic phases the lower notes of a guitar in the confines of an echo-chamber. And yet, paradoxically, I could not truly say that I 'heard' anything. It was more as if some psychologically deep-rooted tuning-fork had been struck in my inner self, to reverberate simultaneously in both my conscious and subconscious beings.

That hackneyed term 'telepathy' sprang to mind, to be as quickly put away. I was well aware that my mind was in no fit state to rationalize with any accuracy whatever on any occurrence; regardless which of my five stumbling senses—or any combination of them or addition to them—seemed to perceive that occurrence. Far less could I afford to believe in things which I knew were fantasies—things I had considered fantasies long before I ever saw the figurine in the museum at Radcar. That was the category in which at that time I placed telepathy.

I might well have gone on thinking along these lines had not my thoughts been interrupted by my abrupt emergence from the basalt passage into a large chamber.

The cavern must have been at least one hundred yards across, making it second only in sheer size to that tremendous vault wherein stood greystone Lh—yib; and its borders would surely have lain undefined were it not for the great domed ceiling—like that other ceiling in the cave of white grass—being liberally dotted with great patches of the same species of luminous lichen.

Stretching up and away that weirdly lighted roof receded, casting down from its curving surface a slowly shifting ‘fire—light’ which illuminated in pale orange and yellow shades the cavern’s centrepiece … a huge, square, sunken area with steps leading down to a great bowl—shaped delve at least thirty yards across—and that depression was filled with what looked like a monstrous mass of greyish jelly, quivering with an inward life of its own …

At first I was of two minds; should I leave the place without more ado, or should I go on down the steps to examine the curious … matter … in the great bowl? Then I forced myself to recall that none of my experiences here could genuinely be said to be happening at all, that this was simply another sequence in an unending dream or prolonged hallucination, and with this in mind I decided to carry on.

And all the while those noises in my ears (or at least in the ears of my mind) went on, growing in volume, I thought, and tinged now with currents of—fear? Yes, fear! I could definitely sense a discord, an element of apprehension, creeping into what had been a perfect if alien harmony …

I reached the bottom of the steps to peer unenlightened at the greyish, quivering pile of spherical jelly—things in the huge stone basin. The stuff looked for all the world like a mass of outsize frogspawn, with each single egg the size of a football, and—

Frogspawn!

Ye Gods—frogspawn! But what kind of frogs might eggs the like of these produce? Conquering my natural revulsion I stooped and lifted one of the heavy things in my hands, feeling of its sticky texture and discerning through its semi—opaqueness a vague outline suggestive of anything but a tadpole. Why!—the unborn creature within that nauseous plasma was shaped more like a foetus than anything else!

I had at first automatically connected the spawn with those nightmare frogs at the pool of the cataract; but now, with that egg warm in my hands and with the weird songs chaotically resounding in a sudden passion of fear in my head, I had second thoughts. No, whatever these beings were they

could in no wise be progeny to those batrachian beasts in that lower tunnel, nor to anything like them. What then?

There had for some time been rising in the air a savage, ululant howling, going unnoticed almost as I pondered the odd nature of the glistening spheroids. Now, as the sound (or rather the experience) increased in volume so as to be an almost physical force, I was driven by it backwards up the steps to crouch fearfully above that awesome spawning place. There I suddenly realized that the hideous reverberations issued from some source separate completely from those other, softer sensations conveying fear. Simultaneous with this realization came that flash in my mind illuminating the whole experience in a light which was at least logical, given that any sort of logic could be said to be permissible in my situation.

It was simply this: I had suddenly seen the unhatched eggs in the bowl-shaped depression as containing sentient creatures—beings that somehow knew of my intrusion and feared it—and if such a wild theory could possibly be correct … then what of the parent creatures? Did they, too, know of my presence in this spawning place, and did they also have this ability to project their emotions? In abrupt terror I knew that they did, *that they were even now voicing their protest in those savage howls of demoniacal rage which had rapidly grown so as to shake my whole being!*

And worse than even this terrifying knowledge, what happened next was more than sufficient to send me in a hag-ridden rush away from the place of the eggs to plunge in mind-jellying horror back down the basalt tunnel—to float in a slow-motion nightmare down the seven steps—to pant in an agony of fear, fear of retribution, from the forbidden tunnel to the gallery and from there to my own cave. And in that cave I huddled in a dark corner, sending my fireflies away from me in the vain hope that without their telltale presence I might remain hidden when They came to seek me out.

For come they must; I was sure of it. As sure as the murderer who hears the sound of the hounds on his trail; as sure as the prisoner whimpering in his cell with the shadow of the gallows falling on him through the bars. After all, was I not just such a murderer … was I not even more a prisoner?

For as the truth had dawned on me atop those basalt steps I had shuddered in an involuntary convulsion—*and in so doing I had dropped that living egg, watching it burst, splatter and run in liquid katabolism to the bottom step—and as the egg had burst asunder so there came from out the hideous ether the baying, blood-lusting cry of outraged parenthood—the*

nightmare promise that those singers of strange songs, the Thuun'ha, would be avenged …

XVII: Taken by the Thuun'ha
Dream-Phase Eleven

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

It was less than half an hour before they came for me, given that for once my time-sense was in good order, but in that short time I had almost frightened myself to death. Sitting there shivering in my dark corner, I had gone quickly over all that had occurred since my fatal discovery of the statuette at Radcar Museum, and my thoughts had led me to some terrible conclusions.

The truth was that I was finding it more and more difficult to believe that everything down there 'below ground' was illusory. Points in favour of prolonged hallucination were legion, yes, but likewise points against! It was one thing to have the occasional mental lapse following a bad car accident —but quite another to 'dream' this entire subterranean sequence.

Yet what other explanation could there be? Psychologically everything could be explained away, but the damnable thing was that I did not feel in any way, well, *mental!* I felt normal—completely normal—or as normal as I should feel in my extraordinary surroundings. There were none of the—usual?—phenomena of orthodox hallucination. But could I trust my feelings, or for that matter any single one of my senses? Does any paranoiac *feel* like a paranoiac? And there again, by its very definition, "hallucination" was by no means inadmissible.

Let's see now—hallucination—yes, if I remembered correctly: "An apparent perception devoid of any externally correspondent object: any sensation or combination of sensations—visual, tactile or auditory—caused by mental derangement, fever or intoxication …"

Well, that certainly fitted me, to a 'T' in fact! Certainly I was feverish—definitely I had been and presumably still was mentally deranged, and increasingly so. But in spite of all this I did not *feel* to be, well, deranged …

… Not until I saw the Thuun'ha, at any rate—and then I *knew* I was mad, and so there was no sense in worrying about anything any longer. I had seen them before, in an earlier sequence of this hellish dream—that first

night in the cave of the stream—but at that time my condition had not been quite so fully developed. Now it was!

Oh, my disordered imagination had had plenty to work on in the development of the Thuun'ha, and it had spared no detail in matching them exactly to that description as translated from the *Brick Cylinders of Kadatheron*. They were only small, but I made no effort to fight them off when half a dozen of them lifted me bodily to carry me out of my cave and into the gallery, and from there down that passage leading back to Lh-yib; one cannot fight that which does not exist! Instead of struggling I merely lay limply in their arms and studied them unbelievingly as they hurried me along. My fireflies had returned to me from their banishment, and the air was full of strange songs and a musty, alien odour—but I barely noticed these things in my amazement at my ruined psyche's construction of such fantastic creatures.

The Thuun'ha were hideous, and no other word could adequately fit them. Perhaps four and one half feet tall, green as Yorkshire beer-bottles, bulge-eyed with flabbily hanging, wattled lips and strangely tapering, furred ears … *hideous!* And their touch was soft, their movements sure, and their telepathic songs were unutterably foreboding as they bore me to that incredible cavity wherein stood the Sister City.

It was all a mad rush to me, with my whirling thoughts only adding to the general confusion. My confusion, that is, for as I have hinted the Thuun'ha were very purposeful indeed; and each movement my bearers and their thronging escort made seemed in its sureness the ultimate in alien efficiency.

Darkness came quickly. At first, when the Thuun'ha took me in horror from the cave, my firefly cloud had followed to swirl in what could only be likened to dumb bewilderment about my head; but as I was borne more swiftly along the corridor to Lh-yib, those luminescent ranks thinned, until merely a speckling of light remained … and then even that vanished.

Once more I lost track of time completely as my light—less rush through the dark bowels of Earth continued, so that it seemed only a minute or so before light returned in blinding brilliance as I was borne out into the dizzy cave of the city. Without pause, closing my eyes against the terror of the journey, I was carried inert and unprotesting across a network of spindly bridges to the great central pillar and then, once again, darkness descended

as my bearers hurried me in through a carved entranceway to commence a spiralling downward course.

During the descent within that great stalactite, at regular intervals, light would suddenly stream in to me, and turning my head I saw that the source of this radiance was the occasional window cut to look out over the Sister City. I remembered having noticed just such windows before, when first I had spied Lh-yib from that great landing onto which the lizard-being had led me from the cave of the mushrooms.

Quickly the descent was over, and still dizzy from the corkscrew fall I was borne out from the base of the huge stalagmite and through the lower streets of the city. There, in every doorway and from every window, peered the hostile minions of the water-lizard gods, leaving no doubt in my mind but that had they their way (and it seemed they had) my punishment would be fitting to my crime. Only once did I see what I took to be a group of the ‘gods’ themselves, well apart from the Thuun’ha and seemingly very aloof; but I was hurriedly bustled away from that area to the very outskirts of the city, then out across the grey, sandy plain, and finally I knew that my ultimate destination lay at the great pyramid—the Place of Worship!

Lying partly on my side in the arms of the six Thuun'ha, I was able to see that as before the silver stream ran and sparkled to the base of the pyramid, continuing its green altered course from that building to the hole in the far wall of the monster cave where it vanished again into the bowels of the earth; but even as I watched, the stream—where it emerged from under the pyramid—began to dry up as I had seen it do before. Inside the pointed building, for a purpose as yet unknown to me, the path of the stream had been rechannelled … but by that token I at least knew that it would soon be the Time of the Mist…

XVIII: Sacrifice
Dream-Phase Twelve

[*The Masters Case: From the Recordings of Dr Eugene T. Thappon*]

My mind was morbidly working overtime as I was rushed in through a low entranceway in the base of the great pyramid. Was I to be subjected to the green mist at its source, to choke and die in its poisoned fumes, or was there a yet more terrifying end in store for me in reckoning for my crime in

the spawning place? Again I found myself in darkness: carried down, steeply down, in tortuous intestines of unlit earth before the course once more levelled out. Then those alien fingers fastened more securely about me as my bearers tightened their grip. There was to be no sudden escape, that much was obvious, and I guessed that it would not be long before the ultimate, unknown destination was reached.

In a few minutes more there came to my ears the rush of waters dulled by walls of rock, and I remembered how I had seen the stream beyond the pyramid dry up. Was this, then, the place to which the waters had been rechannelled from the pyramid? And if so—why? No sooner had I asked myself this question than I believed I could see the answer. As the dank air of the underworld swept by me (so it seemed in that lightless rush), it brought to my nostrils an acrid odour as alien to my sense of smell as was the touch of the Thuun'ha to my flesh. There were liquid gurgles, too, and the deep thrumming of ponderous machinery. In my mind's eye I pictured black cauldrons and churning paddles, with greenly bubbling concoctions steaming and giving off lethally poisonous vapours.

How good my guess was became apparent when I was borne through an extensive cave lit by dull fires which burned beneath lines of huge stone vats extending into the miasmal darkness. The entire place resounded to the chucklings of boiling liquids and the poundings of mixing or stirring devices. Here and there, shadowy Thuun'ha teams worked at the lips of the vats, pouring vessels of noxious chemicals into the bubbling liquids; and above, great vents in the ceiling sucked away the green mist as it rose from the vats in billowing, thickly opaque clouds. The merest wisp of vapour from one vat set me coughing and choking as I was bundled quickly through the awful place. The whole was a dark scene from Hieronymus Bosch—perhaps his 'Hell' from *The Garden of Delights*—and thinking on that artist's nightmare conception, for a hideous moment I believed I was to be thrown into one of the fearsome vats. But then we passed on into the darkness of yet another tunnel.

Down again, ever deeper, to where it seemed the very netherpits must lie, and there in the darkness my fantastic journey came to an abrupt end. I felt myself bundled into a container of sorts, like a basket; and, with a slight swinging motion, there followed the sensation of being lowered into grotesque and even greater depths.

For some time the descent continued, and by groping around I discovered that I was indeed in a kind of basket, with two thick ropes connecting the vehicle to what could only be some sort of pulley system above. Stretching my arms over the side of the basket, I could feel the upward slide of a rough rock wall, and looking down I could make out a red glow not too far below.

Soon the basket swung down into a cave, passing through a ring of flaring, bracketed torches set in the ceiling around the opening of the shaft, so that for a moment I felt their heat on my face. From ceiling to floor the cave was all of fifty feet in height, and from wall to dimly lit wall about twice that distance.

As soon as I saw the place I was filled with a terrible foreboding. Somewhere in my severely damaged mind I dimly remembered having seen this cavern before. But there was something out of place, an awful silence which, unremembered from that previous vision, seemed somehow ghastly in its intensity. It was a silence that screamed.

With a grating crunch the basket settled, and though my first thought was to stay exactly where I was, those above had decided that events were to take a different course. One of the supporting ropes began to slacken, coiling as it fell; but at the same time the other rope tightened, turning the basket violently on its side and pitching me out. Before I could scramble to my feet in the shadow—flickered cave, the basket was withdrawn, quickly ascending and disappearing through the circle of torches into the hole in the ceiling.

Then for the first time I noticed the cave's monstrous flooring. I have said that the basket crunched when it came to rest. The reason, when I came to look closer, soon became hideously apparent. The place was littered with bones. Indeed, the whole cave seemed a veritable ossuary, in which I could hardly have hazarded a guess at the depth of the skeletal debris beneath me.

The vast majority of the bones were very similar to the skeletons of large monkeys or chimpanzees, and I quickly related their characteristics and proportions to the Thuun'ha. Was this then a burial ground of sorts? Then, seeing a skull far larger than the others and picking the thing up in shaking fingers, I saw that this time my find was indeed human. There were, too, certain other large bones of a not *quite* human nature, and I reckoned them to be the scattered remains of long-dead lizard-things. So, the place did serve as a mortuary—both for the water-lizard gods and their servitors—

and, remembering the human skull, occasionally for others! When certain softer remains beneath my feet crumbled, causing me to stagger, I saw something in the grim white expanse that caused the hair of my neck to bristle sharply erect. It was simply a black rubber flipper—of the type used by frogmen—and I thought again of the aqualung in its rotting harness and of those cavers lost in unknown subterranean dimensions …

With only the flickering fire of the high torches to light the place, I had difficulty in making out its more remote corners; and, the better to acquaint myself with my new surroundings, I stumbled flounderingly in the direction of the sheer wall; sometimes sinking to my knees as the bones gave and settled to my step. The feeling that I knew this place and the dreadful fear inside me grew by leaps and bounds, and when suddenly a great, rock-carven statue with magnificent cave-pearl eyes appeared in a momentary flare of bright torchlight, I shrieked aloud and bounded backwards as I finally recognized my location. For I was *inside* that cave of the nightmare —the place I had seen in mad dreams within dreams following Bokrug's story of the origin of the light-tissues—the place of the bones and the reptilian statue and … the …

Madly I stumbled away from the towering figure of stone, across the crackling remains, towards the opposite wall. I had to know for sure … *I had to know!*

I pulled up short, my jaw falling to hang slack, my hands going up before me to prevent a sight too monstrous for reasoned thought. For there, looming blackly in the flickering shadows of the wall, a jagged hole led downwards into utter darkness—*and those bones nearer to the opening were covered with a blackly—shining film of vile—smelling slime the* origin *of which only a diseased mind like mine could envisage!*

And with a thrill of ultimate horror I knew that I could and already had envisaged just such an origin. This *filth* clinging to the bony debris was nothing less than the mark of a Shoggoth’s passing; and this place was where that ‘other form’ as mentioned by Bokrug was kept imprisoned to serve its ‘necessary function’—the elimination of the carcasses of deceased members of the Thuun’ha, their gods, and, rarely, those of inquisitive wanderers from the surface world! And no doubt the Thuun’ha were not above the occasional *live sacrifice! For* to them, surely, the Shoggoth would have been explained away as a death-deity, an avatar of their Bokrug gods!

Scientifically the thing was no more horrifying than cremation, as applied to the destruction of wasted and useless tissues—but as a means of sacrifice …? And especially since it seemed I myself was destined to serve just such a purpose …

With all these hideous thoughts running through my head, even as I peered in nameless dread into the threatening hole, there came a rush of greenish water from somewhere above. Again I started horribly from the shock of this unexpected deluge, shrieking and flinging myself backwards away from the hole. For a moment I cowered there, digging myself into the bones; then, looking up, I saw that a pipe had been lowered down the entrance-shaft, and that the green liquid was rushing from that source. The bony floor had a slight slope in the direction of the black hole, and the water rushed and tumbled over the deeply heaped remains to pour in a swirling flood down that charnel channel.

For perhaps ten minutes the gushing flood continued, while I got myself under a semblance of control and backed away to drier quarters. Shortly the rush turned to a trickle that quickly petered out. The pipe was withdrawn.

It was not long after this that I began to hear again the strange songs of praise of the Thuun'ha. Those ethereal stirrings in my brain had of course been with me all through my nightmare, captive rush through the subterrene labyrinths, but after I had been lowered into the cave of the bones they had faded away and ceased. These fresh songs were altered somehow, different to any I had 'heard' before, and they seemed no longer telepathic but actually physical. I found myself for the first time listening *to* rather than feeling the weird vibrations. With this realization came another—one that caused me to recoil and almost faint at its implications. It was simply this: that those newer, more real songs I was hearing were issuing from the black and reeking hole!

Frantically I searched my memory for the things told me by my Bokrug archetype of the Shoggoth menace, and as I did so I noticed how harsh those previously harmonious rhythms had become. In a little while there came another sound, a rushing as of a great wind, and in the space of a few seconds the loathsome vent began issuing a continuous blast of the most awfully offensive gasses imaginable.

I could picture the Shoggoth down there in the earth, a great black viscous mass, pushing before it its own pressured stench as it rushed upwards in answer to the summons of the lately vanished water from the

pipe. And then I remembered what Bokrug had told me of the Shoggoths—*how in the old days they had grown ever more imitative*—and I knew then why those new, physical songs, issuing along with the monstrous stench from below, were harsher and unharmonious! Down there, with nothing but the occasional mind—songs of the Thuun'ha to keep it company, this last survivor of the Shoggoth cultures had *learned* those sepulchral sounds parrot—fashion, and was even now 'singing' them to itself as it surged upwards to perform its 'necessary function'!

I completely lost whatever little remained of my mind then, throwing myself madly about the skeleton—floored cavern in a vain attempt to find an exit hole or tunnel of escape. Before I knew it the whole cave had started to tremble like a log—cabin in an avalanche. The *Thing* was almost upon me, rumbling up through the poisoned earth in semi—plastic horror. Ever denser the hellish gasses rushed from the hole into the sacrificial chamber, and with every other second I expected the monstrosity itself to put in an appearance at the mouth of that vile pit … which eventually it did!

I was scrabbling wildly over a heap of bones with my back to the hole when the Shoggoth arrived, but even before I turned I knew that it was there. The loathsome exhalations ceased and in an instant the trembling of the walls and fragile floor, too, stopped short. Once more silence breathed in the cave—hellishly expectant silence in which I slowly turned to face my doom.

Great God …! Huge, lidless eyes forming by the dozen in a semi—solid wall of blackly glistening, thickly-mobile sludge—eyes that quickly fastened on me! And no sooner *had the thing spotted* me than it *began to form mouths—great slobbering mouths that dripped a fetid coating of slime on to the already shiny-black bones in the mouth of the terrible shaft—that same* coating *which, in a hardened form, already covered so many of the cavern's skeletal remains!*

Man and monster face to face; and then, even as I sensed that the horror was about to surge forward to engulf me, there came the tremendous blast that brought down the roof of the cave in great chunks, completely sealing off the pit of the Shoggoth—the blast that hurled me face down into the scattering bones, that cracked the cave's very walls with its fury.

I was instantly deafened, my eardrums rupturing as the brute roar of that inexplicable explosion slammed me senseless into the skeletal fragments. It was as if an enormous charge of dynamite had been set off nearby in the

pressured rock, and even the huge statue had been brought down and broken up by the blast. I found myself clawing at the shattered pieces of the great stone head; at the bulging, pearly eyes in that starkly impassive face. Then the torches above were extinguished as even greater sections of the ceiling continued to rain down, and the wonder is that I was not crushed in that avalanche of rock from the roof.

Deaf, blasted and mazed, blind in the inky blackness of the shuddering, crashing cave, I found myself picked up in a sudden titanic rush of icy water and swirled around and about amidst black and bony debris.

The rest of my memories are fragmentary and very dim. They are composed in the main of half-remembered sensations; the sensation of heaving, frantically rushing waters; the horrible sensation of drowning; the sensation of hearing, as if from a great distance, the fear-filled mind-songs of the Thuun'ha, awful now in their intense bewilderment and almost childlike disbelief; and finally, the sensation of a wildly erratic ascent through leagues of labyrinthine resurgences on the crest of a frothing deluge …

XIX: Letter of a Harley Street Psychiatrist

63 (a) Harley Street
London
8 September 1959

Mr Jason Masters
25 Yoden Ave.
Harden Co.
Durham

My dear Mr Masters,

Further to my last report of the 1st: it is with the greatest regret that I now bring myself to inform you of my complete failure in bringing the Professor's condition under control. As you suggested should such prove to be the case, I am now prepared to place your uncle back in your care—though I feel it only fair that certain facts should be made quite clear to you before you agree to any such undertaking. His delusions and hallucinations

are quite the most fantastic I have ever had to deal with; possibly unique in the annals of psychiatric complaints.

For instance: your uncle—even under sedation, hypnosis, the influence of the most modern drugs, or any combination of these devices—refuses to address any person in any term or by any name other than ‘Bokrug’! He *will not* stay in any brightly lighted room without the application of the greatest restraint, and therefore any attempt to work or reason with him must be carried out by candlelight—and even then he is given to grabbing at the candle-flame and snuffing it out! I believe he is quite genuinely suffering from a severe form of photophobia, which is only to be expected if indeed he has spent a year underground. In any case, following such an irrational action (candle-snuffing and so on), he explains that he has only ‘destroyed another of those damned Shoggoths!’

His personal hygiene until recently left much to be desired—due entirely to his condition of course—and unless he was forcibly bathed he would refuse to take anything other than the merest dab of a wash in barely tepid water. Unless he was watched continuously he would relieve himself in the corner of any room in which he happened to be! Even now he will only sleep on a bare mattress, and I still have not quite managed to wean him off fish and/or mushrooms—still the only food he will readily accept. He will only clothe himself when reminded that he *has* clothes to wear, and then reluctantly. He is, too, apparently almost stone deaf—and all these are but a few of the complications of his disorder. I will supply you with a complete list of these psycho-idiosyncrasies at your request.

At best, the Professor is erudite but eccentric in his “logic”, and barring his hallucinations and other fancies his mind’s processes move in quite ordered cycles. The trouble is that these cycles are *not acceptable to us*, for he believes that everything about him is part and parcel of a great dream or nightmare of which he is the author! At its worst (while he never becomes physically dangerous in the sense of a homicidal maniac) his is a horrible condition.

As you requested during our telephone conversation of 23 August, I here enclose a complete typescript of your uncle’s recorded “story” as related little by little to me since you placed him under my care a month ago. A letter to Inspector Blaysden at Radcar provided me with the copy of the statement of Robert Krug, which I have incorporated into the typescript in place of the less enlightening version of your uncle as he remembered and

related it. The typescript as it stands is of course incomplete; there were many recorded sessions which were so garbled as to be meaningless, and no successful translation could be made.

Should the naturally congenial atmosphere of your home, with which your uncle should be well acquainted, prove of little or no benefit to his condition, then I fear there will remain but one alternate course of action left open to you. There are a number of highly specialized private sanatoriums … I can recommend at least four.

In the hope (though admittedly a small one), that at some time in the near future your uncle may be fully returned to you in every respect, I remain …

Yours very sincerely,
Dr Eugene T. Thappon

XX: In Conclusion

[*From the Notebook of Jason Masters*]

It is difficult to know where to begin. I am left, after all my investigations, with such a collection of bits and pieces, facts and figures and dates, incidents and occurrences and coincidences, that their correlation seems near impossible. I know that it should be beyond my capability to write of the thing coldly and without feeling—love of my uncle should dictate a version coloured by emotion—yet I feel that this is the only way to properly present the facts as I know them. I will *only* present facts, a chronological list of events *which I know definitely have taken place*, and in this way I hope to avoid voicing too many of my personal opinions; for such as my opinions are they might well cause me to be considered as having inherited my uncle's "madness"…

On 12 August 1958 Professor Ewart Masters vanished into the Yorkshire Moors. His condition some months prior to his disappearance (he had suffered rather bad head injuries earlier in a car accident) had been unstable to say the least, but his improvement over the month or so immediately preceding that vanishment had almost completely disarmed me—so much so in fact that with hardly an argument I had loaned him my car to drive from Harden down to Bleakstone in Yorkshire. At first all seemed to be

going well with his fossil-hunting trip, and he called me daily on the telephone; but then, after a period of three days of silence, when I contacted The George, the inn at Bleakstone where I knew he had been staying, his disappearance was discovered. On the 15th of the month my car was found in a Dilham side street and attempts were commenced to trace my uncle's movements. He had last been seen on the 12th at about noon, heading across the moors on foot in the direction of Devil's Pool.

For five days search parties covered the moors from Eeley to Dendhope and from Marske to Lee-Hill. I say "covered the moors", but that is of course a gross overstatement, for ten thousand policemen could not have *covered* the moors, let alone the two hundred that tried! There are so very many nooks, crevices and other unexplored places on the great heath. But the police did their best, and for some six months I periodically received copies of further progress reports, all to no avail. Finally, in late February 1959, Ewart Masters was posted as being a "missing person"…

On 5 August in that same year, almost exactly twelve months after he vanished, when I had long since given up hope of ever seeing my uncle again, news came to throw me into transports of hope and wonder. Three days previously, on the afternoon of the 2nd, a naked man had been found in a condition of extreme exposure and ordeal-induced delirium stumbling weakly, mazedly about the countryside near Sarby. His eyes had been closed, apparently against the brilliance of the daylight.

The man, a person in his late forties, had first been taken into a small local hospital; only to be transferred to a private ward in the well-equipped hospital at Radcar when it was seen just how dangerous his condition was. There at Radcar on the morning of the third day, after being asked repeatedly to identify himself, he had finally managed to supply the name of Ewart Masters!

The hospital staff passed this information to the police, and they in turn contacted me. That was how I first came to hear of my uncle's return, and of course I went straight down to Radcar in the hope that I would be able to provide positive identification. There was no doubt about it—the long-bearded, mustached, white-haired and incredibly *pale* man I found between the white sheets of the hospital ward was indeed the professor.

He was asleep when first I saw him, but his nurse told me that it was decidedly better that way (his condition was not a pleasant one when he was awake), for which reason he had been under sedatives since his arrival. Yet

even in his drugged sleep he tossed and turned, groaning and mouthing incoherently of strange and incomprehensible things.

Beside his bed an ashtray sported a huge cave—pearl. The nurse saw me eyeing the thing and told me about it:

“He had that in his hand from the time they found him until he was brought in here. He was holding on to it very tightly—mumbling about Ulysses and a … a Cyclops with *two* eyes! We had quite a struggle getting him to give it up.”

“May I take it? I’ll give it back to him later.”

“Certainly, though if it tends to remind him of whatever he’s been through, it’s probably best if you remove it for good—whatever it is!”

“It’s a cave-pearl,” I told her, tossing the thing thoughtfully in my hand. “Just about the biggest I've ever heard of. Now where d’you suppose my uncle might have got it?” Of course, she had no answer.

I do not intend to write of the professor’s … activities when finally he did awaken. Suffice to say I immediately contacted the best psychiatrist I could find. That was how I came to place my uncle's care in the hands of the Harley Street specialist Dr Eugene T. Thappon.

Within a week I was back home again in Harden, and it was only then that I gave any thought to the odd ‘natural’ occurrences which had accompanied my uncle’s inexplicable reappearance. I had of course already traced his movements in Bleakstone prior to his disappearance, and almost a year had gone by since I had spoken to a policeman in that village who informed me of the professor’s stated intention the day before he vanished of going down to Dilham to have a look at Devil’s Pool. I would have been blind not to have given the idea considerable thought that perhaps my uncle had attempted the exploration of the pool’s continued course below ground.

In this, apparently, I had been correct. The police, having also spoken to people in Bleakstone and Dilham, had arrived at the same conclusion; nor. I was informed, would the professor be the first person to have vanished into Devil’s Pool. It could only have been by a series of miracles that he had managed to survive down there to emerge alive all these months later.

But what of those strange circumstances surrounding his return? For instance: there had been no sudden or heavy rains in the greater Yorkshire area for many months; yet, on the very day my uncle had been found babbling deliriously near Sarby, it had also been reported that three new resurgences had opened up in that same cliff-face whence the figurine in

Radcar Museum had originated. Indeed it was quite possible that the professor had been borne from below ground by the force of these mysteriously and suddenly rushing waters. But what had caused the necessarily vast alterations in the substrata of the moors which alone might explain the sudden appearance of so great a quantity of water? Had some seismic shock or other—a subterranean earthquake, perhaps—been responsible for my uncle's merciful release?

On 18 August I went to Sarby to have a look at the new resurgences myself. Much of the original cliff-face had been broken down by the force of the erupting water and lay in great blocks of lime- and grit-stone, and where once a small stream had chuckled from below ground at the foot of the cliffs there now opened four cavern-like mouths from which rushed veritable torrents of chill water. I spoke to a number of geologists and cavers, there to speculate on the phenomenon, only to discover that they were as baffled as the most uninformed man-in-the-street regards the cause of the sudden flood.

Yet another group of observers—men I noticed keeping very much to themselves and talking in whispers—turned out to be members of the scientific staff of the North-East Coal Board, but understandably I failed to tie this fact in until later.

Fortunately the outgushing flood merged with the Thyne less than a mile from the cliffs, and only one small road-bearing bridge had been inundated. A new bridge was already planned, but in the meantime a team of Army engineers had put up a temporary Bailey.

While my brief trip had produced no really useful information, I was hardly back at Harden before reading in the *Hartlepool Mail* of another archaeological 'find' in the new tributary of the Thyne at Sarby. An extremely violent jet of water on the 20th of the month had thrust out from the cliffs an eighteen-inch fragment of strangely-sculpted stone—part of a reptilian head—from beneath the moors. Equally important were the perfectly preserved bones (presumably prehistoric) of as yet unidentified animals, which the same eruption threw forth in their hundreds. But I was most interested in the sculpture, and I read how the fragment comprised the left side of a face of odd intelligence; lizard-like yet with a high forehead of almost human proportions. An empty socket in the stone face showed where an eye of sorts had once rested. Remembering what the nurse had said of my uncle's remarks regarding the cave-pearl—of Ulysses and a

Cyclops with two eyes—I went straight down to Radcar Museum where the new find had been placed beside that earlier figurine in the ‘Wonders of Ancient Britain’ showcases.

I arrived before the fragment went behind glass and, unobserved, was able to place the cave-pearl in the gaping socket in the great stone face. The pearl fitted perfectly; confirming (so far as I was concerned) beyond all dispute, the fact that my uncle had indeed been trapped underground for a year!

Three weeks later, on 10 September, I received a letter from Dr Thappon in which he admitted his inability to properly improve my uncle's lot; and only three days after that, I had the professor back with me in Harden. There were improvements in his condition, I could see that from the first, but he was still in so very bad a way with regard to things I had been warned of by Dr Thappon that I knew I would be unable to handle him myself. So, to take no chances, I had hired in advance a local male nurse, Harry Williamson, to work nights from 6 p.m. to 10 a.m.—long hours to be sure, but very well paid indeed.

During those first few evenings and nights I gave my wholehearted attention to Thappon's typescript of my uncle’s tape-recorded ‘story’. Much of it, up to the time of his sojourn in Bleakstone, I knew already (though I had not known of the attacks he suffered there), but from that time on, well, it was all new and terrible to me. I did pick up one inconsistency, with regard to the professor's claim of having returned from Devil’s Pool to The George in Bleakstone. Obviously he had not done so. The barman at The George could quite definitely pin-point the last time my uncle had been seen there; and then of course there was that other proof—the fact that my car had been found in Dilham. This much of his story at least was certainly only the professor’s memory of early hallucinations; and much of the remainder—the great majority of it in fact—could surely only be put down to the same origin.

As I have told, I was quite certain by then that my uncle had been underground for a year, and I believed it possible that he had found the crumbling remnants of a long—lost civilization. In support of the existence of such a city, there was the proof of the figurines at Radcar and Bleakstone, and the additional and stronger proof of the cave—pearl eye of the lately disgorged stone face—fragment. Perhaps the professor *had* lived on fish and mushrooms down there in the dark (indeed, considering that he did not

show any appreciable *physical* wastage, such seemed the only likely explanation), but the rest of his narrative—except as hellish dreams or diseased fancies—was quite unacceptable. The greater wonder was that in his state of mind he had survived the terrible ordeal at all…

Like my uncle before me, I, too, found it odd that Inspector Ianson, one—time Inspector of Police at Radcar, had not seen grotesque connections in the Krug case. On 16 September I again went down to Radcar (I had hired the services of Harry Williamson for the whole day), and set about the task of tracing Ianson or whichever relatives he might have left behind when he forsook the country. But here an important find—a *negative* find—for to all accounts Ianson had had no known relatives; apparently he *had been an orphan!*

I did trace a retired policeman, a man who allegedly had known Ianson as well as any other, and then at last I received the first of those clues which eventually were to signal in me certain frightening reversals of belief.

I had spoken to this gentleman, a Mr. Simpkins, on the telephone from Radcar's police headquarters; and later at a public house, The White Horse, I met him as arranged. He was a jovial, healthy—looking old fellow, whose manner and outlook on life gave me complete faith in the reliability of the facts with which he presented me. Over a pint we first chatted of this and that before settling down to the business in hand. Mr. Simpkins was not a man to gossip of anyone without good reason, and I had to explain my case before he would get down to the relevant details. In short, those details were these:

In the two or three years immediately preceding his 'going abroad', Inspector Ianson—a strange, completely hairless man—had suffered increasingly from an obscure form of ichthyosis, a condition he treated himself and of which he would allow no professional medical examination. The disease had not been confined to his skin, for all his bodily movements in the weeks prior to his quitting Radcar and its environs had been stiff and painful. In fact Ianson's appearance had been *not quite human* in those last days, and his attendance at the various police stations had suffered accordingly. Simpkins did not believe that the inspector had gone off with a woman—he had given all the circumstances much thought at the time and had arrived at the conclusion that Ianson, knowing he was dying, had simply gone away, without any fuss, to some private place where he might pass on in peace. That was Simpkins' reckoning. My own …?

From Harden on the morning of the 19th I put through a telephone call to Oakdeene Sanatorium and asked to speak to that institute's director. He was not available, but perhaps the speaker could help me with my enquiry? On learning that I was interested in the possibility that certain inmates at the sanatorium were 'so unnatural in aspect' that they were not allowed to be seen by outsiders, the voice on the telephone turned hard and unfriendly:

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't talk to the Press. There's quite enough in the papers already …" With that the connection had been broken. Until that time I had been unaware of any untoward happenings at the sanatorium.

A further telephone call to the offices of the *Sunderland Echo* (a good friend of mine was a reporter there) supplied me with the following information. I copied the words directly over the telephone, which will explain any discrepancies between my text and that which appeared in the Echo at the time:

TWO DANGEROUS LUNATICS ESCAPE FROM ELMHOLME

> Two Elmholme lunatics, believed to be twin brothers, escaped last night (the evening of the 17th) after being transferred from Oakdeene Sanatorium near Glasgow. For the past six months the two escapees have been undergoing a special course of psychological therapy at Oakdeene as administered by a German psychiatrist of impeccable references, Dr Ruben Kruger. It was on the advice of Dr Kruger—following tremendous improvements in what had hitherto been considered hopeless cases—that the two inmates were moved to the low-security wing at Elmholme, but since their escape the authorities have been unable to contact him. The escaped men are of the following description: bald and with no bodily hair whatever: 70 to 72 inches in height; approx. 130 pounds in weight. They are suffering from severe skin and muscular diseases by which they may be most easily recognized i.e. the skin of their faces and bodies is thick, rough and scaly, and the speed of their movements is painfully restricted. At a distance, they might easily be taken for old people as their movements suggest severe rheumatic disorders …

There was more, but in effect that was the gist of the announcement. I have yet to discover what my friend in Sunderland thinks of the way I ended our conversation (I must think up an excuse for having cut him off without even a word of thanks), but the truth is I simply let the receiver fall before he had done speaking.

Later, when I was able to carry out further investigations, I discovered of the two escaped … men? … a horrible history of madness, peculiar ichthyic diseases and an obscurity of origin so like the background of Inspector

Ianson and the ‘fiction’ of the alleged madman, Robert Krug, that I found myself ever more apprehensive of my discoveries and eventually actually trembling with an inner horror. It was too mad, too fantastic—yet item upon item, clue after clue, the whole incredible jigsaw was piecing itself together into a picture of the most awe-inspiring and hideous aspect.

It was on 21 September that yet another piece of the puzzle slipped itself into place. The morning newspaper carried second-page news of an enquiry opened by the Minister of National Economics into an alleged ‘misuse of authority’ by the NECB. Even before reading the thing I remembered that Krug's statement had been supposedly designed to prevent the North-East Coal Board’s extension of its drilling operations on the Yorkshire Moors; and more … I remembered the furtive seeming crowd of scientists I had seen at the site of the new resurgences at Sarby!

Apparently it had come to the notice of the Ministry of National Economics that the NECB had been carrying out unauthorized experiments on the moors—*experiments involving the drilling of deep shafts into the earth, and the sinking and detonation of powerful explosives!*

The Minister's prime allegation was that these experiments had been directly responsible for bringing about the resurgences at Sarby, the inundation and collapse of a previously quite serviceable bridge, and the destruction of fifty yards of metalled road; but he further pointed out that the results might have been disastrous. Had the water forced an outlet at some other spot, whole villages may well have been swamped!

Of course, I was not much interested in these allegations as such—but I was interested in the locations at which those detonations had taken place. Had not my uncle mentioned a tremendous blast toward the end of his narrative—a blast heralding the waters which carried him to freedom? Hurriedly I read on to discover that the site of the last and biggest explosion of the series had been a spot just some four miles out on the moors. The bomb had been set off by remote control at a great depth in the earth at 10 a.m. on 2 August *only four or five hours before my uncle was found wandering about on the outskirts of Sarby!*

The more I learned the more it appeared that the professor’s hallucinations had had at least a foothold in reality; but I found myself praying that was *all* they had had.

The rest of the thing is easy to relate. It happened so quickly—and, to me at least, its proofs were so *positive*—that everything remains in my mind

with unbelievable clarity. I only wish I could forget all I know of it…

On the evening of 23 September I left my uncle in the capable care of Harry Williamson and went out into the brisk air to walk along the sea cliffs. The shushing of the waves below was soothing to me and I realized how badly, how deeply the occurrences of the last month had affected me. The truth was I had needed to think things over, for I was seriously considering—despite any beliefs I might by then have developed—taking Dr Thappon's advice regards the placing of my uncle in a private home. At least an action such as that, harsh though it seemed, would give me time to carry out further investigations. As it happened, I need not have bothered my mind about the professor's future; even as I turned towards home that night, his 'future' was already in the process of being taken entirely out of my hands …

Now; my house stands at the very outskirts of the village, not many miles from the A19, which of course runs south and to the west of the Yorkshire Moors on its way to Thirsk, York and Selby. I mention this fact in order to illustrate the ease with which a traveller through Harden might make his way directly down to the moors; a journey of no more than ninety minutes to two hours at the outside in a motor—car, especially a car as big as mine.

By the time I reached the garden wall I knew something was wrong. I had set out three hours earlier, at about eight in the evening, and the night was quite dark; but I could see that the house was ablaze with lights and that my car was missing from its garage, the doors of which were swinging open. Passing in through the garden gate at a run, I saw that the front door was ajar. As I skidded to a halt on the gravel path the door opened fully and Harry Williamson staggered out. He was holding his head and there was a mixed expression of shock and bewilderment on his face. Pausing only to ensure that Williamson was not urgently in need of attention, I hurried into the house and made a rapid search of all the rooms. Need I add that my uncle was nowhere to be found?

The statement Williamson made to the police later that night is reproduced in all its important details as follows:

… **T**hen, after Mr Masters went out, I checked again that the professor was asleep and made myself a cup of coffee. I would say that it was about 8.30 p.m. by the time I'd finished my coffee. I cleaned up in the kitchen and

went back to my easy chair outside the professor's room. I smoked a cigarette and then sat reading for a while, just after 9 p.m. I heard the professor talking in his sleep. I knew he must still be asleep because he'd had his sedative at 6.30 p.m. and it normally keeps him out right through the night. The light was off in his room—he likes it that way—and when I looked in I saw a cloud of fireflies over his bed. When I switched the light on these fireflies must have gone out the window which was slightly open; anyway, I couldn't see them. No, not just because it was light in the room … I mean, I really did *look* for them. They're insects, you know? I sat by the professor's bed then for a while, listening to him talking. He was on about 'songs' or something like that, and he kept putting his hands up to his ears in his sleep. Yes, that's it, he kept saying "The songs have started again—they're coming for me …" A few minutes later he began to go on about "dreams within dreams" and other things I could make nothing of. At about 9.30 he became very agitated and started to toss and turn on his bed. Then he sat straight up and looked at me. He was awake then, yes. He said: "Dr Bokrug, I presume?"—he always called me Bokrug—and then burst out laughing. I tried to get him to lie down again and he did, but he kept complaining about the "songs" and putting his hands to his ears. I went to get him another tablet and when I got back to his room he was sitting up again. He said: "Ah, Herr *Ober!* What's on the menu? *Champignons und Fisch?*" I speak a little German so I knew he meant mushrooms and fish. That's his favourite meal. No, I don't know why he spoke in German. A little while later, after getting him on his back again, he started to get violent—but very weakly, because that second pill was getting to work on him. "What's real?" he kept asking me. "What's *real?* Are *you* real? If you are … then you have to help me! They're coming for me! I tell you—*they're coming for me*!" I asked him whom he meant. I had to shout, he's very deaf, and he told me: "Why, *Them!*" Yes, that's how he said it: "*Them*". He carried on: "And they're bringing the Thuun'ha with them … for of course, it wouldn't be seemly for one of *Them* to be seen slavishly bearing in his arms the likes of me!" Yes, I remember he said just that. It sounded so odd to me that I took special note of it. A few minutes later he dropped off to sleep, but he was still very restless and kept mumbling to himself. Just after 9.45 (I was back in my chair again outside the professor's door) there was a knock at the front door of the house. I answered the knock and found an odd-looking chap standing on the doorstep. By "odd" I mean that he was

queer-looking. He had no eyebrows that I could see and he was as bald as a coot. He told me he was a doctor and a friend of Mr. Masters. I was about to invite him inside, to wait on Mr. Masters' return, when I saw a movement at the bottom of the garden in the shadows near the gate. It was dark down there, and I remember thinking what a lot of fireflies there were about—you don't often see them nowadays, certainly not at this time of year. I asked this Kruger chap—yes, that's what he said his name was—if he had someone waiting for him, at which he beckoned in the direction of the gate. I heard the gate open and then these two … well, these two … yes, I *will* get on with it, but I don't know if you'll believe me! I swear to God I wasn't asleep and dreaming it all, but … they were *Things!* No, they weren't people. They walked upright but they were almost like, well, *crocodiles!* but with humanish faces! They had short tails and they were green. *I told you you wouldn't believe me!…* All right. These creatures (I'll call them creatures) each carried what looked like a roll of leather of a sort. I can tell you, I didn't see much of them right then! Quick as a flash I was back into the house and trying to get the door shut. I don't know what happened then. I think that this Kruger chap must have taken hold of my hand as I tried to close the door, but I'm not sure. I found myself flat on my back on the hall carpet. I could hear and think, all right, but I couldn't move a finger. Now, God knows you *can't* believe what happened next—but I swear it's true! This Kruger and the two … creatures … came in through the door and went to the professor's room. They came out again, looking very satisfied with themselves, and went about the house switching off the lights. In the dark I could see that the place was full of fireflies—especially round the heads of Kruger and the … others. Then they left the house and went outside. I thought maybe they'd left for good but I was wrong. I did notice, though, that those fireflies went with them. In less than five minutes they were back *and they brought some other … things … with them!* Yes, I know I said they switched off the lights, and so they had, but those damned fireflies seemed to follow them about so that I could see everything that happened! The other things I mentioned? Oh, yes, well … I mean I can't be sure. Well, they were like … children! That is, they were the same size as kids. Yes, I could see them clearly, but … for God's sake! You simply won't *believe me!* All right, all right. I'll tell you. There were four or five of them. They were small, about four feet tall, I'd say, and they … *they were like nothing on Earth!* No, I don't know. I can't describe them—I won't! … Well, these

smaller things carried the professor from his room and out of the house. The other three stayed for a while, mainly in Mr. Masters' rooms, and then they left too. They took something with them—papers, I think. A few moments later I heard the station wagon drive away. I think it must have been about 10 p.m. by that time. For the next hour or so I tried to get up, and slowly I felt the strength coming back into my arms, legs and body. In the end I did manage to get up. I put all the lights on, and I had just made it to the door when Mr. Masters came home …

I listened until Williamson had done with dictating his statement to the police, then I quickly checked my room. Every scrap of paperwork I had collected on my uncle's case was gone. (I later learned that Thappon's tape-recordings had been stolen from his Harley Street office during the hours of the previous night.)

Then it was my turn—by which time my head was spinning with the mad thoughts whirling round and around inside it. Dully, mechanically, I told the police as much as I knew of the evening's occurrences, which was not a great deal. All the while, I had to fight to keep myself under control. They were so, well, *professional* about it all. But then, when they asked me for a description of my car, my control finally went. I laughed hysterically and told them not to worry about the car: first thing in the morning I would go down to Dilham and pick it up myself…

THE RETURN OF THE DEEP ONES

I: The Conch

My prime purpose in the time which remains to me—and I have reason to believe that there may not be a great deal of that—is to chronicle the events leading up to my present untenable situation. In so doing I intend to leave a warning and an indictment against the insidious encroachment of horrors previously undreamed of. Without a doubt the veracity of the facts I shall present will be questioned, but of one thing I am certain: that if ever the whole truth of the matter is known, Man will never again pretend to occupy his much—vaunted role as "Master of His Own Destiny!" *He is not!*—and has he ever been?

I now find myself questioning the fundamental laws of space and time—those oh-so-long-accepted concepts of cosmogony, of heredity, and of all matters anthropological—yes, and the very basis of human existence itself. Yet the start of it all seemed so very innocuous. I look back on it now, and —

But it were best that I begin at the very beginning …

Some few short weeks ago in the late spring, I received via airmail package from America a fairly large, unusual, especially attractive conch. The shell, carefully wrapped against any possible breakage, was as big as my two fists together. It had an almost circular aperture of about two inches in diameter, and its reddish colour and spiked, tightly coiled whorl gave it the appearance almost of a huge, venomous insect. Of course, when I call the shell "attractive", I speak as a man who once found in all sea—shells the entire spectrum of Nature's beauty epitomized. In retrospect, I suppose others might well have found the shell quite repulsive.

My hitherto unknown benefactor gave an address in Innsmouth, a coastal town in America's New England, and he had penned a brief letter of introduction:

Dear Mr Vollister,

Please forgive this unsolicited intrusion, but having read your recent articles in Oceans, I know you to be a conchologist of note and a well—

known marine biologist. To show my appreciation of your work (I myself was always deeply interested in conchology but never had a professional's aptitude for the work), I herewith enclose a conch from local waters. I am told that the shell is not at all common on your own Atlantic coastline, and since this is an especially beautiful specimen I thought you might like to own it. In the event of your already having one in your collection, then please forgive the frivolous impulse which alone prompted me to do this and accept the shell anyway as a token of my admiration.

Yours very sincerely
William P. Marsh

To say that I was delighted with this completely unexpected gift would be to understate my feelings severely. And as for Mr Marsh's comment about the relative scarcity of his shell on my side of the Atlantic: that, too, was an understatement of no small magnitude.

While I am fairly conversant with all manner of conches on a world—wide scale, my particular speciality concerns those molluscs indigenous to British waters. I could therefore state with some certainty that no such shell was ever taken from the sea off Britain's coast, and I had not previously known of its existence on any coast! The thing was completely new to me; in all my wide experience I had never before come across its like.

To complicate matters and astound me even further, after my initial surprise had worn off and when I sat down to study the shell in greater detail, I discovered one more fact whose singularity would normally have been immediately apparent to me: namely that the shell was sinistral. Looked at from the pointed end, its spiral wound anti—clockwise, towards the left. I knew of only half a dozen shells like this in the whole world, all in private collections and all, in the eyes of their owners, quite priceless.

In short, this shell appeared quite unique; but despite its sinistrality I saw nothing actually 'sinister' about it. Not then.

It was not long, however, before I came to realize that the new conch had somehow … changed things? Yes, I think that is perhaps the best way to put it: to say that the shell had wrought a change in me, in my perceptions. And the first manifestation of the change took place that very night.

I live alone, have done so since my wife died of cancer four years ago, and since then my lovely home has always seemed an extremely sparse and lonely place. Yet that night it was different. There seemed to be an almost

tangible presence in the house, the feeling of a not entirely sympathetic audience to my every move and mood, so that for the first time in longer than I cared to think I felt not at all alone.

The sensation was in no way ghostly, and I certainly did not feel threatened, but at the same time I found it difficult to concentrate on my reading, and twice I actually found myself looking over my shoulder at some imagined sound or motion or whatever behind me. On both occasions my eyes turned to the new conch where I had carefully set it down upon an occasional table.

Before retiring, I wrote a letter to a friend of mine in London. He owned a marvellous collection of shells containing many thousands of specimens, and while his overall knowledge of the sciences of the seas was limited, his specialized knowledge of conches—from the shapes, colours, and sizes, to the waters in which they lived, bred, and died—was almost inexhaustible. He was perhaps the world's foremost conchologist, and therefore probably the most reliable authority. In my letter I gave a detailed description of my latest acquisition, even to the point of doing a fairly accurate sketch of the thing, and asked for information. I made no mention of its origin.

After writing the letter, suddenly tired, I poured myself my customary nightcap and went to stand on the balcony for a few minutes. I watched the sea at low tide, calm and distant, while the moon silvered the sands below the house. Soon, beginning to feel the coolness of the night breeze off the sea, I locked the balcony's windows and went to bed.

I fell asleep almost immediately and began to dream, and my dreams that night were curiously void of visions or scenes and consisted instead of sounds. But such sounds!

They began with the mildest of susurrations: the sounds of small waves breaking on a rough and rocky shore somewhere at the edge of the world. And the sound was so pure, so innocent, that I knew—the way one always 'knows' in dreams—that these were the first waves and this the first shore, the shore of a primal ocean formed of a billion years of rain, that first great rain which filled in the rocky basins of the young Earth to lie volcanically warm through all the years of the pre-Cambrian age, warm yet empty of life, sterile and dead, awaiting Nature's great awakening.

Then the watery sounds grew louder and I envisioned the primal moon—a rough sphere of partly plastic rock, alive with its own volcanic activity—wobbling uncertainly in an as yet eccentric orbit, gradually taming the tides

of Earth's mighty oceans in which, at last, the first life-forms swam and spurted, or walked on jointed chitinous limbs. And the tides came and went for a quarter-billion years as gradually the ocean's sounds grew louder, until it seemed I could hear the cries of her denizens, forever locked in the eternal battle for life, for existence, in vast and mildly salty vaults of Ocean.

And always in the background, in my inner ear, there was a less certain sound, one that I sensed rather than heard, the impossible sound of sentience—of *intelligence*—however alien, in a world where the first dinosaurs had yet to emerge from the steaming fens of the Carboniferous.

But now, building rapidly from the surging sounds of tumultuous tides, there came the crash and roar of massive waves and the howling of ocean tempests. I heard the sundering of mighty volcanic cliffs as the raging sea brought them avalanching down, and the cries of great winged reptiles buffeted by winds that whipped imagined wave-crests to a white and frothing frenzy.

And behind all of this strange voices cried out in concerted … prayers? Prayers, yes, but to no God of Earth. This I knew, and knew also that these worshippers, whoever—whatever—they were, had predated Man in this world we call our own.

Then those strangely familiar voices receded, were swept away in a resurgence of the crazed rushing and roaring, until it seemed that I myself struggled and gyrated in pounding surf and roiling whirlpools. And at last, dizzy and overwhelmed by these awesome sounds and sensations, I started awake.

Or, rather, I seemed to wake up. My uncertainty stems from the fact that later I was made to believe that I could not possibly have awakened. Let me explain:

I have said that I started awake. Outside, the storm raged and I could plainly hear the surf on the cliffs. My first thoughts, however dull and heavy those thoughts were, involved getting up to check the windows and doors. Then I remembered having done so the night before. A glance at my watch showed me that the time was 2.15 a.m. I put my head back on to the pillows and listened for a while to the howling of the wind and the rush of water; and finally I drifted back into a sleep which, apart from very vague and fantastic impressions of limitless deeps and weed—festooned submarine cities and shrines, was restful and trouble—free.

In the morning, with the sun blazing through my bedroom window as it climbed, already mid-way to the zenith, I awakened, remembered the night's storm and, clad in my dressing-gown, went through into my study and out on to the balcony. The sea was as calm as when last I saw it; the beach at the foot of the cliffs was not strewn with the driftwood and debris I had expected; there was no evidence at all to support my storm's existence!

But there *had* been a storm, surely …?

I was at the door for the delivery of the morning newspaper and I casually mentioned how fresh the world looked after the storm. The youth from the village newsagent's shop, Graham Lane, answered:

"What, last night, Mr Vollister?" he grinned. "You must have been dreaming, sir. No storm last night …"

"About two in the morning?" I persisted, frowning. "Certainly between two and three. Wind howling and the sea in an uproar?"

He yawned and shook his head. "Not last night. I was walking with my girl on the beach until two-thirty. Beautiful night."

Suddenly I knew that he was right, and I immediately changed the subject. "On the beach until two-thirty, Graham? With a girl? Is it that serious, then?"

He laughed. "The big day's in September," he said. "Would you like an invitation?"

"By all means! I'd be delighted," I answered, and again changed the subject: "How's Old Man Lane keeping?"

"Not too good. The shop's been too much for him for years now. Once I'm wed I think he'll take a back seat and let me run the business."

—And we chatted for a minute or two longer before I gave him my letter to post and let him take himself off on his bicycle. But I wasn't really concentrating on the conversation; I was trying to work out what had happened. This was something entirely outside my experience. For, after all, a dream is a dream and should in no way have supernatural complications. Dreams do not carry over into the waking world—or should not—or at least mine never had. Not until now. In the end, I simply shrugged it off with a weak and rather bewildered laugh.

Then, distractedly, though my heart was hardly in it, I scanned the newspaper and read the one or two items of interest. Afterwards I washed and dressed, made breakfast, and finally went back into the study where the strange new shell awaited my attention. I picked the thing up and

thoughtfully admired it, mentally attempting a comparison with other specimens in my own large collection. In its shape it was not unlike the Sicilian *Spondylus gussoni*, though of course it was many times larger than that common shell. I was completely baffled.

I took down several books on conchology from their shelves and made a most diligent search, thinking that perhaps in all the hours I had previously spent researching those very books, somehow I might have missed or forgotten or simply skipped over the New England shell. But no, the thing was given no mention, not even in my most comprehensive works. It was, it must be, a hitherto unknown species. But if this were so, then why had my American benefactor seen fit to pretend that it was fairly common? And why had he sent it to me?

I carefully composed a letter to Mr. Marsh at his Innsmouth address, then spent half an hour on the telephone talking with a friend of mine in one of the larger reference libraries in London. If my own books weren't comprehensive enough, then it was perfectly obvious that the library in nearby Newquay wouldn't be able to offer much. London should have been a different matter entirely. But that as it may be, my efforts once more proved fruitless; the conch I described was nowhere to be found on record.

That afternoon I took my daily walk in the village, posted my letter to Mr. Marsh, purchased one or two household items, and finally headed for home again. I had an article to finish, and worked at it for an hour or so before retiring early. Slightly apprehensive though I was about sleeping (the thought had come to me from somewhere that my problem—if indeed I had a problem—was most likely tied up with my subconscious, my sleeping mind), I nevertheless passed a completely undisturbed night and, following a light breakfast, went back to work on my manuscript.

And so life went on, once more mundane and tranquil enough, for two more days and nights until the weekend came around. By that time, while my new shell remained as enigmatic and unknowable as ever, the edge of its mystery had become dulled for me, particularly since receiving from Ian Carling, my great conchologist colleague, a telephone call which, while his excitement at my news was amply apparent, left me just as unenlightened as before. He did mention, though, that he had spoken of my discovery to a friend of his, "a queer sort of chap but likable enough in his own way", who had said he might contact me. At Ian's request I made a mental note to obtain photographs of the shell and get them off to him as soon as possible.

But then, just before noon, when I had barely started upon the final revision of my manuscript, my telephone rang again … and continued to ring insistently, so that I was obliged to leave my work to answer it. The caller introduced himself as one David Semple, of Mayfair in London, and he was that friend whom Ian Carling had mentioned.

"Any friend of Ian's is a friend of mine, Mr Semple. What can I do for you?"

"David—please call me David," he insisted. "And it's more what I can do for you, I think."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Ian has mentioned this queer shell of yours, and I think I might be able to throw some light on it."

"You're a conchologist then, Mr, er, David?"

"No, no—but I am a collector."

"Of shells?"

"Of books!"

"Books?"

"Indeed, Mr. Vollister—or should I call you John?"

"Please do."

"Good … Yes, I collect books. Old and new—first editions and modern reprints, priceless antiques and worthless, poorly—printed paperbacks. But they all have one thing in common. You see, John, I've had a lifelong interest in the macabre, the weird, the strange, the occult!"

"Well, that's all very interesting, er, David, but I fail to see—"

"Wait, wait! About this shell of yours—let me read something to you. One moment. Ah, here we are:

"'Even as big as a small child's head, the seashell is thickish and bears sharp spines ringed about its coils. Its mouth is not much smaller than the mouth of a man, and indeed it has the look of some animal's mouth. Reddish in hue, the shell has not a wholesome aspect, but the snail itself is as a delicacy to the tainted palates of the Deep Ones. Yet they crop the slug with care, for under their direction vast colonies of the creatures layer the pearly and subaqueous houses and temples of their cities! Thus were the mighty Pacific temples beautified in the great deeps about R'lyeh, and even Y'ha-Nthlei's columns and colossi are cemented with the grey-green nacre of the shellfish's mantle

The voice at the other end of the line paused, then: "Well?"

“Well, I suppose it could be my shell,” I told him, “but where on Earth did you find that passage you just read to me? It sounded extremely old—not to mention very weird!”

“Yes, it’s over two hundred years old: an English translation of a passage from an even older German work, the rather ugly *Untersee Kulten* of Graf Grauberg. And there are illustrations, too—rather crude, I fear, but adequate. So that if this is your shell, why, you should easily manage to match the drawings against the real thing.”

“I’d like to see that book,” I said at once, trying but not quite managing to keep the eagerness out of my voice.

“But that’s why I'm calling you,” he answered. “It so happens I’m to be in your area for a few days early next week—some business to attend to, you know—and I thought we might meet.”

“Why, certainly: I look forward to it. You might like to stay here at the house?”

“Thank you—very hospitable—but no. I’m a founder-member of a boating club not far from Newquay. I shall stay there and not put you to any trouble. Now then, if you’ll tell me when we can meet…?”

“Why, any time—but can’t you tell me more about the book right now? Perhaps I could obtain a copy, and—”

“Obtain a copy of the *Cthaat* Aquadingen?” he laughed. “No, I don’t think you could, John. It’s one of those books—like Gantley’s *Hydrophinnae* and Gaston le Fe’s *Dwellers in the Depths*—which are very seldom found. Banned or burned, mostly, many years ago. Forbidden volumes, “black books”, they’re called: like the *Necronomicon* of Abdul Alhazred, and Von Junzt’s *Nameless Cults.* But we’ll talk a lot more next week.”

“Fine. I’m home all week. I usually take a walk in the afternoon along the beach or in the town, but you can get me at home most of the time. Just give me a ring …”

“Oh, don’t worry, John,” he told me, sounding suddenly strange and distant. “I'll be in touch with you …” And with that he was gone.

Sunday and Monday passed very slowly. My interest in the new shell had waxed, waned a little, and was now redoubled. I would find myself pacing the floor of my study with the thing in my hands, quite without

realizing that I had picked it up at all. I could not wait for Mr Semple's call. Then, Tuesday afternoon …

I walked along the cliff top path towards the precipitous wooden stairway that led down to the beach. There, sitting on the grass at the very edge of the cliff, a girl gazed out across the sea, her legs dangling in space one hundred and twenty feet above needle rocks, her chin cupped in her hands. She wore jeans, an oversized sweater of a towelling material, and her hair was tied back with a silken green handkerchief. Beside her on the grass lay a yellow crash—helmet with a jaunty peak; the sort young ladies wear when riding or being carried on scooters and motorcycles.

I do not much care for heights and always feel uncomfortable when others treat them with contempt. I paused, keeping well back from the rim, and called: "Miss? Excuse me? Er—could I talk to you?"

She turned and smiled—a peculiar sort of smile, I thought—then swung her legs up and rolled clear of the edge. Picking up her crash-helmet, she climbed easily to her feet. She was no more than twenty-two, twenty-three at the outside, but there was in her face something that hinted of a rare intelligence, a wisdom belying her years. Her features were almost elfin-like, large-eyed and small-chinned, and her hair was so black and so reflected the green of the handkerchief that it seemed almost green itself, even pearly in its gloss.

She approached me with her head on one side, still half—smiling. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry, er, Miss. Heights affect me badly. I just wanted to get you away from the edge of the cliff. Please forgive me."

"Don't let it worry you," she answered in an accent, however slight, which immediately gave her away for an American. "I was just about to go down to the beach anyhow. Are you going down?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, would you mind if I walked with you?"

"Not at all, I—"

"It's just that the beach looks so lonely."

"I know what you mean."

We said no more until the wooden steps were behind us and the cliffs towered above. On the way down, she had gone before me, and I admit that I found myself attracted by her lithe, jean-clad form. Reaching the bottom first, she had turned to smile at me again, half-knowingly, I thought. But

knowing what? Her look, it dawned on me, was not at all one of wide-eyed innocence. Then she laughed at my own serious expression, asking:

"You're sure you don't mind me walking with you?"

"Er, no. I mean, I'm sure!"

"You look so worried!" she laughed. She linked arms with me and we walked down towards the sea, turning north towards the village when we reached the high-water mark.

"Big, isn't it?" she said, holding my arm tightly.

"Hm? The sea? Yes, it's big."

"My home," she said, "is—let's see—way over there!" She squinted out over the flat grey sea, pointing a finger west and slightly south.

"North America," I said. "New York, perhaps?"

"Close enough, I suppose. What's in a few hundred miles?" Then her hand flew to her mouth in mock alarm. "There I go, giving away all of my secrets."

"Secrets?"

"A girl with no secrets has no mystery …" Then she quickly changed the subject. "Do you swim?"

"I do. I swim very well. But the sea is still quite cold. You won't find many bathers for a month or so yet."

"Let's swim," she answered impulsively.

"But—what about costumes?"

At that, she laughed—as earthy a laugh as ever I heard—and began to pull her sweater up over her head. Embarrassed, I half-turned away, anxiously searching the beach with my eyes but seeing no one. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her stepping out of her jeans, and again I averted my gaze. But her laughter was wholly free and fresh, so that when I heard her feet flying seaward I turned to stare after her …

And then I, too, had to laugh. Her bikini, tiny though it was, was most certainly decent. Obviously she had worn it beneath her clothes; and equally obvious was the fact that she had deliberately set out to embarrass me! Oddly enough, I didn't mind at all.

She ran into the calm sea and swam maybe fifty yards out. There she played, splashed, and shouted, occasionally diving beneath the surface and staying down for what I thought to be inordinately long periods. Using my watch, I timed her on her last dive and found that she stayed down for well over two minutes; the girl swam like a fish! And yet I was in no way

astonished by her performance. I myself have always found swimming a delight, and my own capacity for remaining underwater for long periods has often surprised my friends. I believed it to be simply a matter of willpower.

A few minutes later she came out of the water and ran up the beach to me. She sat at my feet where I myself sat on a flat stone and handed me her sweater of soft towelling.

"Dry my back," she commanded, turning her back to me and letting her hair fall forward over her shoulders. However cold she felt—and indeed her skin was cold—she hardly showed it; not a goose-bump showed on her pale skin and her breathing seemed perfectly controlled. Despite the fact that I was at least fifteen to twenty years her senior (or then again, perhaps because of it) I fancied that my heart beat a little faster as I patted her back dry and gave her back her sweater.

Later, as we continued our walk along the beach and climbed the crumbling sea wall to the promenade and so into the village, she told me her name. She was Sarah Bishop, an American of an old New England family, on holiday ('vacation", she said) with her father. They would be in England for some weeks yet while her father sorted out various property matters. Having several relatives living in Cornwall, the old gentleman—he was sixty-seven—was thinking of retiring there. When I asked where she and her father were staying, she told me they had rooms at a boat club between the village and Newquay.

At this I was reminded of what David Semple had told me when I invited him to stay at my house: that he was a 'founder-member of a boating club not far from Newquay'. I wondered if his club—presumably some exclusive sort of place for rich yachtsmen and such—could be one and the same with Sarah's, and I was on the point of questioning her about the place when we reached the village police station.

There, as if I no longer existed—or as if she had never heard of the word 'goodbye'—she turned her back on me, put on her crash-helmet, unlocked the anti-thief device on a motor-scooter which was parked at the kerb, and kicked the engine into life. As she guided the scooter into the road I was moved to call out:

"We may meet again …?" And having said it, I felt unaccountably foolish.

She looked back over her shoulder and smiled that strange smile of hers. "Oh, we surely will," she said. "Of course we will!" Then, in a clatter of

tiny pistons, she was gone. She left behind a dispersing cloud of blue exhaust smoke.

Walking home again along the beach, I found my mind wandering. I was miles away, almost completely unaware of the passage of time or distance, and it actually came as a surprise when I found myself at the top of the wooden stairway that led to my cliff top retreat. Daydreaming, my mind had been on many things—but chiefly on the girl. She evoked something in me; a memory that seemed much more than mere memory, really; a feeling of … *déjà vu*?

Her skin, for instance. When I had dried her, I had noticed a peculiar film to it, a sort of mild oiliness, but the feeling had not been at all unpleasant. Remembering, my fingers tingled slightly. It dawned on me that I had not felt this way for … for a very long time.

II: The Place on the Beach

That night I worked until very late and retired well after midnight. I slept until mid-morning, ate a small breakfast, and was no sooner dressed than I became aware of a visitor. I heard a car approaching the house and went out on the balcony in time to see it draw to a halt below. When the driver got out, I hailed him from where I stood at the balcony rail:

"Hello, there! Can I help?"

"I'm David Semple," came the reply. "Have I come to the right place?"

"You certainly have. Wait just a moment and I'll be down."

The house is built to my own specifications, with bedrooms, study, and bathroom upstairs; kitchen, small library, storage space, and garage downstairs. Since I never did learn how to drive, the garage long ago became just another storage room.

I hurried downstairs and unlocked the front door. Semple grasped my hand as soon as I appeared. His handshake was firm enough, though cool and moist. I welcomed him in and saw him upstairs and into my study; and there, as unobtrusively as I might while pouring drinks, I carefully scrutinized him.

He was slim, rather pale, and I would have guessed that he wore a toupee. His skin was uncommonly rough and seemed large-pored. His walk was almost that of a sailor; and why not, since on his own word he was a founder-member of his boating club? For no justifiable reason, I found

myself disliking him. There was something odd about him, something I could not quite pin down, insubstantial, but something which nevertheless set my teeth on edge.

No sooner had Semple made himself comfortable than he spotted the conch where it lay upon the occasional table. “Ah!” he exclaimed. “Yes, most certainly!” He crossed the room and picked up the object of his interest. “Without a doubt this is the shell—the shell from the book!”

“You’re absolutely sure?”

“As sure as I can be without actually having the book here with me to make a positive comparison.”

“You didn’t bring it?” My voice showed my disappointment.

“No, I'm sorry. Fool that I am, I left it at the club. But we can have a look at it later …”

By now, however, and despite my consuming interest in his subject, I had taken the opportunity of studying my visitor more closely. In so doing I had discovered several more peculiar idiosyncrasies none of which, however petty they might seem normally, had improved my liking for the man.

There was, for instance, an odd gasping quality in his voice, a suggestion of fighting for air that made me wonder if perhaps he was asthmatic. But if so, why did he wear his silken scarf so high on his neck and so well wrapped about his throat? Indeed, why wear a scarf at all on this unusually warm day? Also, now that we were together in the close confines of my study, I found myself very nearly offended by the heavy odour of his aftershave—if that was what it was—and even more disturbed by an underlying smell of … of what?

Perhaps the sun was at fault, warming the beach to send the taint of rotting seaweed wafting up to my balcony. But the balcony doors were closed, and what slight breeze there was came off the land …

I was aware suddenly of his strange gaze. He was looking at me most oddly, eyes large and round behind modern, heavy-rimmed spectacles—and it was a look which, inexplicable as my feelings were, chilled and quickly unnerved me.

I half started to my feet, causing him quickly to enquire: “Is there … something?”

“Do forgive me,” I fumbled. “It’s the room—so stuffy—forgive me for bringing you into an unaired room—I worked late last night.”

“My goodness! Don’t concern yourself,” he answered at once, “I’m perfectly comfortable.”

“I’ll open the French windows anyway,” I said, getting hold of myself at last.

“Please do, if it will make you happy. Probably a good idea. I should hate to pass on to you my cold and sore throat.”

So that was it; and doubtless the smell I had noticed was an embrocation of some sort or other. Nevertheless, my initial dislike for Semple remained. Still, he was not here for my approval but to offer his assistance. For that, at least, I should be grateful. I decided to put my unnatural apprehensions behind me and try to be as pleasant as I could in Semple’s presence.

“How did you find your way to the house, er, David? It's not the easiest place to find, and the road between here and the main road is barely a track.”

“Oh, I—” he looked momentarily lost for words, then quickly went on: “I obtained directions in the village. Of course, I don’t know the locals, but they seemed to know you well enough.”

“Yes, they do, though I suppose I must seem a bit reclusive to them.”

“This is an excellent whisky,” he said after a while, changing the subject.

“Thank you. I pamper myself a little. But I’ve been thinking, David, what an odd coincidence this is.”

“Coincidence?” he sounded wary.

“Yes. That this ridiculous enigma of a seashell came into my possession in the first place, and that you should then find reference to it in some strange old book. Even better—that we should discover two facets of the same mystery and bring them together through a mutual friend. That in itself seems something of a coincidence.”

“I suppose so,” he said after a moment, again favouring me with that weird look. “But listen—you can’t possibly have had lunch yet—why not come back with me to the club? We can eat there and you can look at my books to your heart's content.”

“Books?”

“Oh, yes. I brought more than just the one. Well, what do you say? Later I’ll drive you back here.”

I agreed to his suggestion without further discussion, and not entirely because of my interest in the American shell. Sarah Bishop had been in the back of my mind since last I had seen her riding off on her motor-scooter. If

Sarah and her father were staying at Semple's club, then perhaps I would meet her again this very day, and—

—But in any case, she was very much secondary to my obsession with tracking down the new shell (or so I told myself). This might be my last chance to discover whether or not the conch was indeed a brand new species, hitherto unknown to science—though apparently, if Semple were correct, it had not been unknown to the author or authors of his book.

I wanted to change into more suitable clothing, but Semple said that was completely unnecessary. No one at the club worried greatly about dress. Comfort was thought to be more desirable; and in any case I was already perfectly well attired. I consented to remain just as I was, and we went down to the car.

During the journey, which took little more than twenty-five minutes, we remained for the most part silent. Semple concentrated on the road and I cradled the shell in my lap and eagerly looked forward to reading of the thing and seeing its representation in his book. For the first half-mile the ride was bumpy and slow, but then we turned left on to the main road and the car shot forward. We passed through the village in a matter of minutes and several miles later turned left again on to a third-class road or track that led seaward, toward shrub and bramble-grown cliff-tops.

Where human habitation was concerned, this area of the coast was only very sparsely settled; one or two farms, yes, but not even a hamlet outside of Seaham, "the village", as I have always referred to it. The next town of any size or importance was Newquay, half an hour's drive up the coast. If privacy were a prerequisite, then this must surely be the perfect place for an exclusive club. The coast was very wild, however, and so for a place of any size to be built a large amount of money would have to be spent. Well, there were still plenty of people who could afford that sort of money.

Soon, tall shrubs and tangled undergrowth sprang up to border the track. Semple drove carefully through this shaded region for a hundred yards or more, over a rise and then down to where the horizon showed a mating of sea and sky. There, where shrubs, trees, and brambles had been cleared away to allow gravel to be laid, he turned under a large, low, open-fronted structure to park alongside a dozen or more cars of various makes. Several were of the large American variety, one of which was just pulling away.

Turning in my seat to stare after the car as it drove off, I caught a glimpse of dark, lumpish figures with pale faces in the passenger seats.

Strangely round eyes peered back at me for a split second, then were gone. What it was about those faces I couldn't say, but at the sight of them—the merest glimpse—it was as if someone walked over my grave …

We left the car and walked to the edge of the cliffs. Below us, like a bite taken out of the coastline, a small bay enclosed a crescent-shaped beach. One of the rocky bay arms had been extended to form a jetty and breakwater that curved inward and protected the calm waters of the tiny bay. A variety of boats—even a small, very expensive-looking yacht—were moored in the bay, though there appeared to be little sign of life. The patio which fronted the club itself was deserted.

Right where we stood, the cliffs had tumbled down years ago, leaving massive blocks of stone that formed an uneven and precipitous slope down to grassy banks, but the debris of the fallen cliff was grassed over now and trees and shrubs had sprung up along the length of the fault. A wide wooden stairway with a handrail fell steeply from our position, losing itself in the trees, becoming visible again at the bottom. There it merged with a path of concrete paving-slabs which in turn led to the club sprawling on the beach.

The clubhouse seemed deserted to me, and as Semple and I descended the stairway I examined the place whenever I sighted it between the trees. Grey and blue, it was of modern design and spacious. Its front was raised up on piles driven deep into the bed of a kidney-shaped depression scooped out of the beach well above the tideline; its sides and rear area were shaded by fangs of rock weathered from the cliffs, and by trees grown in the lee of those same jagged boulders. It looked for all the world like the retreat of some retired and reclusive tycoon rather than any sort of boating club I had ever seen before.

We entered the building by a side door that opened into a small lounge or reception area. Across the room was a moderately stocked bar, but no one seemed to be in attendance. A frosted glass door to our right led out on to the raised patio in front of the club. It would be pleasant, I thought, to sit out there in the summer when the tide was in. An iced drink, sunglasses, the cool breeze off the sea …

Semple's voice brought me back down to earth:

"My room is this way—"

We passed through a swing door to our left into a long corridor. Passing us on his way to the room we had just left, a tall, bent, peculiarly vacant-looking man of indeterminate years smiled emotionlessly at Semple,

enquiring in a rough, guttural, and most unappetizing voice: “Can I get you a drink, sir? And your friend?”

“Thank you, Sargent, yes. Whisky, I think?” Semple looked to me for my approval.

I nodded, “Yes, that’ll do fine.”

“A bottle, Sargent,” said Semple, “and two glasses. Oh, yes—and some crushed ice.”

“Your room, sir? Or the club room?”

“My room, Sargent. Oh, and you’d better book Mr Vollister in for lunch.” He turned to me. “It’s fish today. Very good!”

Shambling by us, the man called Sargent mumbled something about only being a moment or two, then he passed out of sight through the swing door.

“This way,” said Semple, leading me down the corridor.

I was struck by the gloominess of the place. Very little light entered from outside. While the furnishings seemed sumptuous enough, still there was an aura of mustiness about them, of an unpleasant dampness. Perhaps the club was a little too close to the sea after all, or maybe the central heating was out of order. There must, of course, have been central heating …

Doors were set at regular intervals along the inside wall of the corridor. Reaching the last of these, Semple took out a key and opened it. He ushered me into the small room beyond, saying: “Make yourself comfortable, John. I’ll be but a moment.”

He went out, turning right into the corridor and leaving the door ajar. Out of completely uncharacteristic, almost morbid curiosity, I peered out into the corridor after him in time to see him disappearing through a second swing door at the corridor’s end. As the door swung behind him, a muted babble of voices came back to me—secretive voices, I thought—from what must have been the club room. Then the door swung quietly shut, deadening all but the merest murmur of conversation. Since I could make out no single word, I moved back into Semple’s room.

A moment or two after I had seated myself in an easy chair, Sargent knocked and entered. He carried a tray with bottle, glasses, and a small silver bucket full of ice. After muttering something that I found completely incoherent, in answer to which I could merely smile and nod, he left and I was able to have a look around Semple’s room.

The atmosphere actually was gloomy, so much so that I put on the light, a tiny shaded bulb in the centre of the ceiling, the better to see by. The room

was as small as I would expect a guestroom in a place such as this to be, with a single bed along one wall, a small table of Eastern design near the head of the bed, the easy chair in which I sat, a linen basket, a narrow cupboard, one small desk, and a straight-backed chair. Also, along the wall opposite the bed, was a three-tier bookshelf.

All disquieting thoughts and doubts, however dimly formulated, were immediately crowded to the back of my mind. I stood up and went to the bookshelf. There, among many titles previously unheard of, were several that Semple had mentioned when first he contacted me: such books as the *Cthaat Aquadingen,* Gantley's *Hydrophinnae,* and Gaston le Fe's *Dweller in* the *Depths.* But among the others new to me were volumes whose very titles seemed disturbing, conjuring up vague memories or pseudo-memories of youthful nightmares. I mean titles like the *Book of Dzyan,* the *Dhol Chants,* the *Liber lvori*s, and the *R'lyeh Text.* Volumes such as these, despite the fact that as yet I knew nothing at all about them, cast ominous shadows over my mind; and the peculiar aura that I had felt from the first in this decidedly odd building seemed to thicken, closing in upon me as I stood, wrapt in the contemplation of Semple's 'library'.

Finally, I took down one of the books—at which the door swung open behind me and my host's voice said:

"Ah, yes! The *Cthaat Aquadingen*—of the great deeps and the dark demons that inhabit them. Yes, and the spells with which to raise these demons—among other things! You are correct, John, that's the book with the description and drawing of your shell. Would you like to make a comparison now?"

He took the book from me, opened it, and began to search the pages. I picked up the New England conch from where I had laid it, and Semple indicated that I should sit at the desk. He sat beside me at the head of the bed, saying:

"All of my books deal with the weird, John—at least, with subjects considered weird by the unenlightened—and that's why I was so interested in your shell. If I'm right, well, it will have been interesting to track down an actual specimen from a book considered by most to be nothing but a pack of esoteric fables, lies, and fairy stories. Ah! Here we are. Now, then, what do you think of that?"

He placed the book on the desk before me so that I could study the faded text and drawing on the chosen page. And without a doubt it was a drawing

of my shell!

Holding the conch, I turned it until its angle was that at which the artist had drawn it, and it was the very duplicate of the shell on the printed page. The inks with which the drawing had been tinted were just as faded as the text, but even so the colours came through, helping in positive identification.

In a way, I was disappointed (that the shell was not the unique thing I had thought it, not even in its sinistrality, for the drawing was left-handed, too), but at the same time I found myself fascinated by the text. “This is the section you read out to me over the telephone,” I said. And out loud I repeated: “‘Reddish in hue, the shell has not a wholesome aspect, but the snail itself is as a delicacy to the tainted palates of the Deep Ones.’”

“Tainted, indeed!” Semple cut in, his voice slurred and deeper in pitch, it seemed to me in indignation or anger. “Everything they don’t understand has to be tainted. Man eats birds and beasts, aye, and shellfish, too, but when it suits him he talks of the palates of others as being ‘tainted’!”

I was taken aback by the fervour in Semple’s voice—by that and by his completely inexplicable outburst—and I turned to him to discover what had prompted it. His eyes, large and round behind the lenses of his spectacles, stared fixedly at the open book with a look of … of outrage? But why? Then, seeing my look of astonishment, he immediately pulled himself together.

“Forgive me, John. There are things you don’t understand … yet.” Then he changed the subject completely: “But listen: there’s lots of time for you to look at this book—and the other books, too, if you wish—but let’s first have a drink, yes?” He generously poured whisky over ice. “Oh, and there’s a young lady staying at the club who tells me she knows you. She and her father are engaged upon a project here which might interest you. And then there is our little collection—”

“Collection?” I sipped at my drink, pleased with its clean, familiar taste in this unfamiliar place.

“Oh, yes, very interesting. Several of our members are divers—that is to say they explore the ocean floor in one way or another—and they allow us to enhance the club with their finds.”

“Their finds?”

“Yes, they are displayed here. Fascinating! But why waste time talking about what you may see for yourself? If you'll follow me, John?”

I finished my drink and went with him.

We turned right into the corridor and through the swing door into what I had taken to be the club room. If it was, then it doubled for a dining-room, for Sargent and two others were busy arranging chairs at a long table set for lunch. I followed Semple straight across this room to a third swing door. Passing through this and holding it open for me, he said:

"This is our display room. I'm sure you'll find it utterly engrossing …"

And how right Semple was—and what an understatement.

Here and there about this fairly large room, which was at the landside extreme of the building, were scattered easy chairs and divans, but all around the walls and displayed upon specially constructed room-dividers similar to deep bookshelves were the very treasures of the oceans. Actual treasures: French, Spanish, and even Roman coins of gold—small bars of gold and silver, encrusted, discoloured, and welded together by action of the salts of the sea—amphorae and pottery which any museum in the world would be proud to display, alongside ancient bottles whose colours, shapes, and designs made them the very rarest of antiques.

And then there were models of ocean-going vessels of the early 19th Century, of sailing ships large and small—vessels such as the barque *Sumatra Queen* and the brig *Hetty*, of which a brass plate on the base of their display cabinet gave details and a brief history—all constructed with loving care and in painstaking detail. I glanced at the brass plate for a moment longer, for something about it had caught my eye; but then, beckoned by Semple, I moved on.

"Come, John," he said. "I believe that's Mr. Bishop over there, Sarah's father. Since you know her, I'm sure you'd like to meet him."

At the far side of the room, hidden until now by ceiling-high display cabinets, seated at a large, heavy table and studying a number of fantastic models, a tiny hunched old man seemed quite oblivious to our presence. As we approached him, Semple cleared his throat.

"Ah—Mr. Bishop?" The figure at the table turned, and Semple nodded a quick, respectful greeting. "Mr. Bishop, allow me to introduce John Vollister. This is the gentleman of whom Sarah has spoken. The, er, conchologist."

"How do you do, sir?" I held out my hand.

The shrunken figure at the table made no attempt to stand; neither did he offer his hand, nor did he answer me immediately. Instead, he looked at me,

and I in turn stared at him. I stared, yes, and yet was not conscious of the rudeness of my act, for this old man was indeed something at which anyone caught unawares might reasonably be expected to stare.

He wore what appeared to be a high-collared, yellow silk dressing-gown, buttoned up under the jaw, ancient pince-nez spectacles behind which eyes as big and bigger than Semple's stared fixedly, and a flesh-coloured skullcap which smoothly covered his scalp and ears. For a full minute the great eyes gazed into mine, then that small head turned and offered Semple the slightest of nods—a nod of approval, I thought—and finally Mr. Bishop spoke:

"I hope you are well, Mr. Vollister?" His lips, which were pale, thick, and fleshy, barely moved. His words, which came as the merest whisper, were yet harsh, as if forced from vocal chords almost atrophied by some cancerous wastage. Before I could answer him, he continued:

"Please sit. Look at the cities. Are they not beautiful?" As the old man turned back to the strange models on the table before him, so Semple drew up a chair for me. I sat down beside Mr. Bishop, noting as I did a musty odour which seemed to emanate from him in heavy waves. Or was it simply the odour of the entire club house—the smell of deep seas—and particularly this room of treasures from the ocean floor? I tried to ignore the clamour of mental alarm bells, bells of warning at the edges of my subconscious, giving my attention instead to this eccentric old man's words.

Spread upon the table before us, three separate structures reared model towers and ziggurats from an undulating base made to resemble the seabed. They were remarkable models and intricately designed, and since patently they were meant to represent submarine realms, I hazarded a guess as to their names:

"Atlantis, perhaps? And this one could be Mu? Yes? And finally there's this one …"

Mr. Bishop's wide mouth turned up at the corners in what I took to be a smile. "No, no, Mr. Vollister," he whispered hoarsely, "Atlantis and Mu were cities of men, gone down beneath the waves in vast seismic convulsions—and in geological terms gone down quite recently. R'lyeh, on the other hand, is a city as old as the moon—and it is not a city of men, though it has on occasion stood up out of the sea where it lies sunken once more. Look, this is R'lyeh."

For a moment, as he pointed, I caught a glimpse of his shrivelled hand where it protruded from the wide sleeve of his silken gown. The man obviously suffered from some severe ichthyic disorder: his flesh was silvery-grey and scaled, his fingers webbed. Then I looked more closely at the model he had indicated.

So this was a miniature of R'lyeh, a name which—in connection with the New England conch—I already recognized from the *Cthaat Aquadingen.* Model though it was, nevertheless the thing was constructed to give an impression of unbelievable size, with vast green-slimed blocks of stone looming up dizzily to a monstrously carved monolith, about the base of which stood statues of loathsome krakens and squids poised in menacing attitudes.

Architecturally the city—if city it were, and not some mad builder's nightmare—was like nothing I had ever seen before. One looked upon the thing and received impressions rather than a true overall picture. Nothing specific fixed the eye at all, only suggestions of vastness and of queer angles that formed surfaces which were at one and the same time convex and concave. The geometry was dramatically out of touch with anything mundane, was blatantly alien, and over every senses-defying surface sprawled octopoid and piscine bas-reliefs of the most disturbing and unbalanced nature, and hieroglyphs that hinted of worlds and dimensions not only lost in vacuous abysses of time but separate from the clean world of Earth by countless light years.

Complemented in its hideousness by festoons of weed and oceanic incrustations, the thing was nothing less than a crazy nightmare. "City' the old man may have termed it, but I saw it only as a monstrous necropolis, and I shuddered at the thought of any man, genius or lunatic, deliberately sitting down to construct the thing; and I wondered morbidly at the inspiration, real or imagined, from which this menacing model had sprung.

"Awesome, isn't it?" enquired the old man, as if reading my thoughts. "Perhaps this other model, of Y'ha-Nthlei, will be less … confusing?—to your eyes and mind." Again he pointed, and once more I saw that withered claw he wore for a hand, and again I looked at the object of his instruction.

It was the second of the submarine cities—Y'ha-Nthlei, he had called it—and, yes, it was more acceptable, far less intrinsically alien; and indeed certain of its lines were quite pleasing, designed with a flowing symmetry. In fact, the longer I looked the more I found myself imbued with a sensation

of glory, of being uplifted, as if I gazed upon some shrine or holy place. For, layered as it was in every detail with a softly luminous mother-of-pearl, the model glowed with a chill internal fire, a cold fire that seemed to burn through weed and slime alike to set spark to memories that lingered, half-awake, in the back of my mind and being.

Blinking my eyes and shaking my head, I looked again. There was something Roman or Grecian about it: with balconies, great esplanades, and sweeping stairways; and then there were temples and amphitheatres, and everywhere columns and fluted pedestals and statues. But while the statuary and the titan idols of the temples were those same krakens of R'lyeh, still the place appeared to my eyes much as I might have expected to find Atlantis, a city drowned in prehistory. With but one exception.

As old Mr. Bishop had pointed out to me, this was not a city of men sunken in some cataclysm of Earth, it was a city *built beneath the sea* in aeons lost to memory, built and inhabited by subaqueous beings—a city of the Deep Ones. And as such, Y'ha-Nthlei still lived!

"But what purpose do you have in I finally began, and paused uncertainly. "I mean—why are these models here?"

The old man smiled at me with that queer turning-up of the corners of his too-wide mouth. "Pardon?" he whispered. "Our purpose in having the models here? The answer is simple: the real R'lyeh lies in the depth of the Pacific many thousands of miles away, and Y'ha—Nthlei is far away across the Atlantic. We cannot have the real thing, and so—

"Sunken cities and lost races," Semple abruptly, hurriedly cut in, "are a hobby of Mr. Bishop's, John. A hobby which almost entirely absorbs him. But come, they're serving lunch. You can come back in here later, if you wish."

I stood up on legs which were unaccustomedly shaky, glancing down at Mr. Bishop where he remained seated. For a moment more he gazed up at me, then turned his eyes back to the models on the table. He reached out his hand and it trembled as it touched the skeletal frame of the third and last model, as yet incomplete, little more than miniature foundations. But as I began to turn away, I distinctly heard him whisper:

"Ah, yes, John Vollister, you may well wonder. But when Ahu-Y'hloa is finished out there in the sea, and when you yourself see her shining towers and temples and her myriad pillars, then

I would have turned back then to question him again, but Semple caught my shoulder and cautioned me with a finger to his lips. “The old man,” he explained when we were out of earshot, “is not quite right. It’s his age and his condition, you understand.”

“Listen, David,” I drew him to one side as we went back through a swing door into the dining-room. “There’s an awful lot I don’t understand here. A good many odd coincidences that don't quite seem to—”

“John!” came a girl's voice from behind me—a voice that sounded genuinely full of surprise and pleasure—driving all queries and doubts right out of my mind. “There, didn’t I say we'd meet again?”

I turned, and it was Sarah Bishop. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Semple make some sort of sign, a greeting perhaps, but I could sense that he was glad of Sarah's intrusion. “I’ll speak to you later, John,” he said as Sarah led me away to the table.

Seven or eight residents or club members were already seated, and I joined them, Sarah at my side, without formal introductions. Not wishing to seem gauche or ignorant, I none the less averted my eyes from them as best I could, but not before noting the fact that they all seemed cut in the same mould. Indeed, it was as if they were all members of the same family. With the exception of Sarah, Semple, and one or two others, all of them wore a peculiarly repellent, bulge-eyed, ichthyic look, as if they were younger versions of old Mr. Bishop.

I would have made conversation with Sarah, but we were no sooner seated than she struck up with a woman on her far side. I concentrated on an excellent prawn cocktail washed down with a glass of resinous yellow wine, then went on to the main course of boiled fish beautifully dressed. My own portion was excellently cooked, but I did little more than taste it. I had noticed that the others at the table, with the sole exception of Sarah, seemed to be enjoying portions which to all appearances were partly or wholly raw!

A queasy feeling which had been growing in the pit of my stomach since my arrival at the place—particularly since taking that glass of whisky in Semple’s room—seemed suddenly to come to a head. My extremities became unmanageable in a moment, and unable to grip knife or fork I let both fall clatteringly to the table. As I struggled to my feet, Sarah took my arm, her strange eyes full of concern, her mouth framing a question I could not hear. The room tilted and swam before me, and a roaring filled my head. I was conscious of bulging eyes staring curiously and fixedly at me where I

swayed, my hands gripping the back of my chair in that gloomy and ominous room.

Later I was to remember thinking that this was the way I had felt as a small boy following a debilitating illness, when I had been prone to fainting spells—and also that whatever else happened *I must not faint here*, not in this strange place of strange people. Then my vision blurred over completely and in my whirling mind's eye I saw submarine visions of R'lyeh and Y'ha-Nthlei, and of finny shapes that swam in the shrouding weeds—and knew where I had seen those cities before: in my dreams on the first night after receiving the New England conch!

Finally, as I swayed and fell backwards into waiting arms, I saw again a mental picture of those sailing ships of old, the brig *Hetty* and the barque *Sumatra* Queen. The ships, yes, and the brass plaque beneath their case—which proudly described them as being "*Vessels of the Marsh Line, out of Innsmouth!*"

Then, for a while, I knew no more …

III: Tide of Terror

I doubt if I could ever convey the wonderful feeling of relief that flooded over me upon awakening safe and sound in my own bed, after a period of unconsciousness full of indeterminate but extremely frightening dreams and nightmares. There was a dull ache at the back of my skull, and my vision was still blurred, but I knew my own room.

I was not alone: Sarah was with me. I heard her sharp intake of breath and sensed her movements as I began to move my limbs beneath the sheets. How I knew it was her I can't recall; perhaps her perfume, but something made me certain of her identity. Then, against a glow of late afternoon that penetrated the drawn curtains of my room, I saw her outlined as a silhouette. She was doing something … pulling on her sweater, I thought. I couldn't be sure. Things were still very hazy.

I closed my eyes against the sudden light, and a moment later felt her cool hand on my brow. Finally recovering my senses and orientation, I asked:

"What happened? I feel such a damned fool!" I opened my eyes again and her face swam into perspective. She wore a worried look, which gradually relaxed as I tried to smile at her.

“The doctor said it must have been something you ate,” she said. “Probably the prawns. The reaction was so very quick! He said you'd probably been letting yourself go lately—not bothering greatly with yourself—that you were run down and in a state of nervous exhaustion.”

“Doctor?” I half propped myself up.

“One of the club members. He gave you a shot, said it would keep you asleep for a few hours. I have some pills for you, too. Here.” She took a glass of water from my bedside table and popped two yellow tablets on to my tongue. I swallowed them without thinking, then washed my mouth with water.

“They should put you down for a few hours more,” she added with satisfaction.

“Now wait a minute!” I protested too late. “I have things to do, and—”

“You have nothing to do that won’t wait,” she said.

“But how did I get back here—and who put me to bed?” Suddenly I was conscious of my nakedness.

“David Semple drove you back here and I followed behind on my scooter. But you have to stop worrying, John. Everything is all right, now.”

“But—”

“No buts! You rest now and I’ll go into the village for some food. Did you know your icebox is almost empty? Later I’ll make us a meal.”

Feeling a warm numbness creeping slowly up my body and wondering at the swift efficacy of the tablets, I let my head fall back on to the pillows and closed my eyes. Before sleeping, I turned on my side and was surprised to find a hollow beside me in the softness of my mattress, as if someone had lain there recently. The hollow was still warm and it smelled of a heady, musty perfume …

The next time I opened my eyes it was to find the room in darkness. Through a gap in partly—drawn curtains, stars showed in a clear night sky. I had been awakened by the clatter of crockery from the kitchen downstairs. Good as her word, Sarah was back and at work.

My headache had disappeared, and sleeping seemed to have done me good. Considering that my day had been extraordinary, and that my health had so recently been in jeopardy, I felt remarkably well. None the less, I stayed right where I was, relaxing as the sweet smell of frying chicken came drifting upstairs to me. There was the sharp tang of coffee, too, and it seemed unlikely that I would be left alone much longer.

Very well. Now was my chance to think things out. In the space of the last few days, event had piled upon event thick and fast, and I had had little enough time to assimilate all of the details. It had all been very bewildering, and in retrospect unreal. Perhaps Sarah's 'doctor' had been right and I had let myself become run down, which might in turn explain why I was hallucinating or imagining the most peculiar things. Yet the strangeness had not been confined merely to the last few days, for the beginning of it all could be traced back to the arrival of the New England shell. The 'Innsmouth' conch …

Yes, it had started with that peculiar left-handed conch from unknown deeps; with that, and with my equally unknown benefactor, one William P. Marsh. And it had been a Marsh, too—an 'Innsmouth' Marsh—who had owned that line of sailing vessels back in the early 19th Century. Coincidence, of course. After all, what's in a name?

… Marsh had sent me the conch, out of no apparent motive other than admiration for certain of my writings; I had been unable to trace the thing; it was to all intents and purposes a 'new' specimen. Ian Carling had seemed as much excited about it as I was, which to me had been ample proof of the thing's unique status. And yet it had been described in a book as old as the hills, and its picture had been drawn for that book God only knows how many years ago! I thought of the book.

The *Cthaat Aquadingen:* a strange title, I wondered what it meant. 'Aqua' must surely be 'water', and 'dingen' was German for 'things'. Something about water-things? A passage from the book flashed suddenly before my mind's eye:

"… the snail itself is as a delicacy to the tainted palates of the Deep Ones."

Just a few words, but for some as yet unfathomed reason they had angered David Semple inordinately. And how did the rest of it go?…

"Yet they crop the slug with care, for under their direction vast colonies of the creatures layer the pearly and subaqueous houses and temples of their cities!"

Their cities. Cities like R'lyeh and Y'ha-Nthlei, perhaps? I thought of the model I had seen of many-columned Y'ha-Nthlei—of the pearly, nacrous patina that glowed over its shrines, statues, and kraken-adorned columns—and my mind conjured up the vision of armies of conches and

their snail inhabitants crawling over naked stone, building up a glistening surface of nacre to ‘beautify’ the houses of the Deep Ones.

And who in hell were the Deep Ones, anyway? Some secret society or other? Deep Ones: somehow the words had a familiar ring to them, but in what connection? R’lyeh—Y’ha-Nthlei Deep Ones—Ahu-Y’hloa? What on earth was it all about, and how had I managed to get myself caught up in it?

Sarah’s footsteps on the stairs put an abrupt end to my cogitations. She entered through the open door—a silhouette bearing a tray—moved over to the bed, and put the tray on my bedside table.

“I’m awake,” I told her, sitting up. “And I’m feeling pretty good.”

“Fine!” she answered. “Are you hungry?”

“For a bite of chicken and a mug of coffee? Yes, I am. What time is it?”

“Almost midnight. You began to stir about half an hour ago, so I got your meal going. I’ve eaten already. But I'll enjoy watching you. You don’t mind?” She switched on the bedside lamp. The lamp had a red shade, and in its warm glow there was that about Sarah Bishop which fascinated me. Suddenly I remembered something, and secretly reached out my hand beneath the sheets to where the hollow had been—that warm, musty-smelling hollow. But it was no longer there. I had either destroyed it in my sleep, or … or it had not been there in the first place. Just a part of some forgotten dream.

While I ate, Sarah sat in a wicker chair and hugged her knees, watching me attentively and yet, paradoxically, in a strangely lazy manner. I could feel her eyes on me, but her half—pensive attentions caused me no great concern. I was very much at my ease with her, as I had felt with no other woman since losing my wife. As I finished eating, she said:

“Your pyjamas are under the pillow; dressing-gown behind the door. I’ll go wash up, and you can stretch your legs. Then I suppose you’ll want to talk.”

“There are things I’d like to ask you, Sarah, yes. But shouldn’t you be getting back to your father? It’s not that I’m ungrateful, but I'm sure he’ll be worried about you.”

“He’s in London—and in any case, I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself.” She smiled. “Or is it that your English roses all turn into pumpkins when the clock strikes twelve? I can leave whenever I want to, or whenever you want me to. My 98cc carriage is right outside!”

“If I had neighbours,” I told her, “you’d ruin my reputation—if I had a reputation!” Then I shrugged and added: “All right, I’ll dress and then we’ll talk.”

She stood up and took my tray. Leaving the room, she looked back over her shoulder and asked: “Five minutes?”

I nodded, and she closed the door behind her.

I dressed in my pyjamas and gown, splashed some water on my face in the bathroom, and generally tidied myself up. Then I went through into my study and put on the light. Something was missing.

The shell…

Damn and blast! Following my fainting fit, the New England conch had been left in Semple’s room at the boat club. Angry at myself, I promised that I would pick it up at the first opportunity. Then, noticing that however good I felt my legs were still a bit shaky, I opened the French windows and went out on to the balcony. I aerated my lungs and looked out upon a calm night. A few minutes later, hearing Sarah mounting the stairs once more, I went back into the study and called out to let her know where I was.

She walked in, dressed as I had first seen her, and came straight over to me. She took my hands in hers. “Are you sure you feel all right? I may tell you, you had me worried at the club.”

“My right arm stings a bit,” I answered, rubbing at the dull ache that I felt between elbow and shoulder. “Other than that I seem to be OK.”

“Don’t rub it,” she admonished. “That’s where the doctor stuck his needle in you.”

“Oh!” I frowned. “Well, it seems I'm indebted to this doctor of yours, whoever he is. Nervous exhaustion, you say? Strange—but I suppose he must be right.”

“You were just a bit overwrought, that’s all. Perhaps it was simply that you were in strange company, and that—”

“Strange company!” I rudely cut her off. “You can certainly say that again!”

For a moment she looked hurt, and I quickly apologized. “I'm sorry. I meant no offence. But there’s a certain *feeling* about that place you’re staying at, and I noticed a few things that didn’t really seem, well, normal.”

She frowned and half turned away; then having obviously reached some decision or other, faced me once more. “All right, John Vollister, I’ll tell you what it’s all about, but first you must promise me that it will go no

further.” She saw the questioning look forming on my face and quickly added: “Oh, don’t concern yourself. There’s nothing criminal about it.”

“Well, then,” I laughed, “that settles it. I've always loved a mystery. Come on, tell me all about it.”

We seated ourselves in easy chairs before the open French windows, cool but comfortable in the almost unnoticeable breeze off the sea, watching for a while as the moon silvered a path from the horizon to the beach. The night was very calm.

“Do you have any idea,” Sarah began with a question, “how much water there is in the world?”

“It covers sixty per cent or more of the Earth’s surface,” I answered.

“No, no, no!” she said. “That's like looking at an apple and counting the drops of dew on its skin. It doesn’t tell you how much juice there is inside.”

“Or how many worms,” I added.

For a moment she favoured me with that strange look of hers, half—searching, half—wondering, before continuing:

“Very well, let’s look at it your way: mathematically. The Earth's surface is almost two hundred million square miles, of which one hundred and twenty million are water and another twenty million glacial ice. Agreed?”

I nodded. “Knowing very little about it, I’ll just have to accept your figures. You seem to know your subject well enough.”

“And so I ought to,” she answered, “for I’ve studied little else for the last three years. You'll see why soon enough.”

I shrugged, settled back, gazed out over the sea, and listened to her, wondering in the back of my mind what it was about her that so attracted me.

“So far we’ve only looked at the surface,” she went on, “but what about under the sea? The Altacama Trench in the East Pacific is over two thousand miles long. You could drown all the British Isles in the trench at least five times without raising a ripple on the surface. Similarly, you could take Everest, turn it upside down, and sink it in the Marianas Deep—and its base would still be two miles underwater! Do you begin to see what I’m getting at?”

“That there’s an awful lot of water?”

She frowned impatiently. “Well, you’ll begin to take me seriously in a moment—I hope! No, what I’m trying to say is this: that while man has explored almost all of the surface of this planet, and while he has even

walked on the moon and looked hungrily at the other worlds of the Solar system, he knows hardly anything about the deep oceans."

"And what would you have him know?"

"Nothing, just yet, but I'll tell you what we've discovered … in a moment. First, though, answer me this: why should intelligent life in this world have confined itself to Man the Land-Dweller, when in fact life began in the waters which form by far the greatest habitable mass in the world as a whole? Why should Man, trapped in the two dimensions of dry land, be the dominant species?"

I shrugged again, trying to play down my increasing interest in her subject. I had suspected her high intelligence, but already my estimate seemed in need of drastic upward adjustment. "I suppose it just happened that way," I eventually answered. "There is, of course, the dolphin …"

"The dolphin? His brain is large but he has no hands. Thus he's limited in his use of tools. No, he befriends the Deep Ones just as he occasionally befriends Man, but in no way can he be considered of the same high order."

"The Deep Ones!" I immediately sat up and took hold of her arm, facing her squarely. "I keep hearing mention of them, keep seeing them named in print, but who or what on earth are the Deep Ones? And what is it that you're driving at, Sarah? Can't you explain yourself more clearly?"

She climbed to her knees on her chair and threw an arm about my neck, her face close to mine, more serious than I had ever seen her before, but at the same time more childlike. "All right, I'll tell you about … about the Deep Ones. The difficulty lies in knowing where to begin."

"Try the beginning," I advised.

"The beginning? I doubt if anyone could ever really fathom the beginning. But I can make a few educated guesses…

"In the beginning there was a wonderful godlike being. His name was Cthulhu and he came down from the stars in Earth's prehistoric youth, when this world was the merest infant among worlds. He was old even then, but immortal—or very nearly so—and he built vast cities for his own kind in the steaming fens of pre-dawn Earth.

"Of his species, Cthulhu was the Father, the Great Old One, but many others came down out of the void with him. Among them there were Ithaqua the Wind-Walker; and Yog-Sothoth, the all-in-one and one-in-all; and Shudde-M'ell, the huge and subterranean burrower beneath; and many, many more. All of them were mighty in 'magic', the magic of wonderful

sciences which made their aeon-long voyage down countless light years possible, and they fled from the tyranny of other beings whose abhorrent laws they could never bring themselves to obey.

“Their oppressors followed them, and because they could not kill them imprisoned them here on Earth and in dim dimensions adjacent or parallel to this star system. Cthulhu was trapped in the vaults of R'lyeh and sent down beneath the deepest oceans to dream forever and yearn for the freedom which once was his.”

She paused, and I took the opportunity to ask: Then this Cthulhu—is that how you say it?—was a Deep One, as were all of the others trapped in the sea with him?”

“No, no. Cthulhu is the greatest of the Great Old Ones. The Deep Ones are merely his Earthly minions, his followers, his worshippers. He is the basis of their religion. They themselves are man’s watery brothers, man’s aquatic counterparts, the intelligent lords of the seas. They are a race of subaqueous beings for the large part unsuspected by Man. That is to say, they have in the main kept themselves to themselves. Only very occasionally, more often than not accidentally, has their existence been suspected.”

Again she paused, and once more, somewhat incredulously, I took the opportunity to put a question to her. At least, I tried:

“Are you seriously asking me to believe that—”

“That Man is not the sole master of this world?—that there are mermen and maids?—that in the countless millions of cubic miles of water surrounding this planet there is an intelligent manlike species whose origin, science, art, and religion predates Man? Yes, I am.” She paused briefly, then continued:

“Is it so hard to believe? Can you so easily discount all of the countless sightings of mermaids reported through the centuries? As long as Man has recorded curious stories and legends—which is to say since the first man learned how to write—he has been aware of the people that live in the sea. It’s only recently, in the modern, so-called ‘enlightened’ world, that explanations have had to be devised to put aside what Man has chosen to consider a myth, a pipe dream of drunken old sea captains.

“Ah, but in the days of the old clippers, in the days of the Pacific and East Indies trading ships, then there were captains who discovered the truth! They discovered that the Deep Ones were real—that mermen and maids

really did exist, and that mutually beneficial co-existence was possible with these their brothers in the sea.

"For make no mistake, John Vollister, the Deep Ones are our brothers and sisters. Indeed, in certain of their own legends they have it that land-going Man descended from them, that Man's 'missing link' was in fact a Deep One. And who is to say that they are wrong?

"Is it so very inconceivable that long ago, when the first lungfishes were floundering on the muddy shores of shrinking oceans, Man was already exploring the land? Amphibian, yes, but naturally bipedal. And perhaps when those primal Deep Ones returned to the sea some of them stayed behind, at the edge of the waters, later to lose their gills and evolve into true men.

"True men! Is there any such thing as a true man? The first men, the *original* men, were Deep Ones. And I for one am glad that my forebears came up from the deeps rather than swinging down from the trees! … But now, John, let's have it right out in the open:

"My father and his friends at the club are at present negotiating with just such beings, are actually in contact with the Atlantic Deep Ones, whose cousins in their Pacific cities—where still they worship Cthulhu, dreaming in his crypt in R'lyeh—were known to the old sea captains of Innsmouth in the first decades of the 19th Century."

She paused again and looked me straight in the eye, defying me to laugh, willing me to believe that what she had told me was true; and in her own eyes—which were huge, dark, and liquidly hypnotic—I could discern no spark of humour, no sign that she was anything other than deadly serious. When I said nothing, she asked, "Well? What have you to say now?"

"What have I to say? What can I possibly say to all that?" I finally answered, starting to feel more than a little exasperated. "Sarah, I like you—in the very short time I've known you I've come to like you very much—so much so that I really don't care to see you being made a fool of, or for that matter making a fool of yourself.

"Now, if as I believe you're one hundred per cent serious about all this, then it can only be that someone else is pulling your leg, having a laugh at your expense. Why, the theories you're proposing are downright ludicrous! Mermaids; intelligent manlike amphibians; submarine cities and shrines to immemorial gods old as the Earth itself—utterly ludicrous!"

“Ludicrous?” she exploded, white with anger. “Let me tell you something, Mr. Marine Biologist—”

“No,” I sharply interrupted, angry in my turn, “you listen to me. Why, you’ll be asking me to believe in flying saucers next! Have these crackpots who’ve been filling your head with all this rubbish produced one single shred of evidence to support their crazy ideas?”

“Blind!” she spat the word at me. “Completely blind—and probably deaf, too, if this conversation is anything to go by.” Then her anger melted away in a moment and she broke into a peal of laughter. “Oh, John Vollister, you fool! What an opportunity you’ve been given. You, a professional marine biologist—for which reason you were chosen to be their intermediary, their ambassador—and all you can do is ridicule what should by now be obvious to you.”

“Obvious to me? I don’t see that anything is—”

“No, you don’t see. But today you actually have seen. You’ve seen Deep Ones! You ask for evidence? Wasn’t that evidence enough?”

At her words I found myself assailed by sudden, incredible doubts. “I saw them? I saw Deep Ones? I don’t

“*You sat down at the same table with them!*”

Something of the nausea I had experienced at the yacht club returned along with the memory of those repulsive people I had seen eating what I had taken to be raw fish, so that I could hardly restrain a grimace as I said: “But those people were completely degenerate, or at least they looked so to me.”

“Degenerate?” She seemed hardly able to believe her own ears, and when next she spoke the anger was back in her voice with a vengeance. “Would a visitor from another world be degenerate because he was different? Is the Chinaman, the pygmy, the Eskimo degenerate? Is ‘different’ degenerate?” Suddenly blazing with fury, she sprang to her feet. Her small clenched fists trembled at her sides. “Of all the pig-headed—”

“Now wait a minute,” I cut in, standing up and taking hold of her arms. “A joke’s a joke, but—”

“Joke!” she choked out the word. “There’s only one joke here, John Vollister, and you’re it!” She pulled her arms free. “Well, you’ll know where to find me when you want to apologize.”

And with that she was gone, storming out of my study, down the stairs, slamming the door of the house behind her to make me wince at the sound,

and so out into the night. A moment later, I heard the clatter of her machine's tiny engine, but even then I was too astonished at her exit to make a move.

Finally I thought to step out on to the balcony, from which I could see her in the beam of her headlight below. Half in shadow, she was putting on her crash-helmet. "Sarah," I called down. "Sarah, listen to me."

"Listen, nothing!" she shouted up at me. "I'm different from your English women, John Vollister. I don't simply stand still and accept insults. Especially insults to my intelligence. Oh, yes, I'm different all right —"different", do you hear? Does that make me degenerate, too?"

And away she went, her headlight's beam cutting an erratic white swath through the darkness. I watched that shaky beam go out of sight, then went back inside and sat down. After cursing myself for a fool—and Sarah for a bigger fool, for it certainly appeared that she believed all the rubbish she'd been spouting—I poured myself a drink, then a second, and later a third …

After that, and after consuming a further half-bottle of whisky in extremely short order, I was too drunk to think at all (a condition I had not experienced since the frustrations of my courting years) and so put the whole thing out of my mind. I would deal with it in the morning. Fumblingly, I locked the French windows and made my way to the bedroom where I collapsed upon my bed.

For a while, the darkness was soothing, then the room began to spin, reminding me how much alcohol I had consumed. Mercifully I was not sick, but the day's events had hardly been such that I could hope to sleep peacefully on them. I remember cursing myself again for a fool before drifting into sleep …

And, of course, I dreamed.

It was the same dream as before: at first the gentle water-sounds, gradually building to a storm, a tempest—and the sensation of nameless aeons of time passing in a chaos of primal ocean, geologic ages concentrated into mere moments, and the sepulchral sounds of alien prayers, of monstrous worship, throbbing hideously as a background to the storm's fury—until once more I was crushed in pounding surf, tossed unresisting from one giant wave-crest to the next, and gyrated madly on the glassy walls of dizzy whirlpools.

At this point, as in that other dream of mine, a week old now, I started awake. I awoke—but there came no surcease, no abatement of the crashing of waves and the hiss of flung spray. For a moment only, I thought myself still dreaming; then, leaving my bed, I went shakily into the study and steadied myself at my desk.

There the storm sounded even louder, as though the waters dashed about the very feet of the cliffs below the house, and I knew then that the tide was in and the sea must be in an absolute tumult. A glance at my watch told me the time was 3.15—an unthinkable hour to be awake and suffering from a hangover in the middle of a storm!—and I had slept for only an hour or two.

I went unsteadily to the French windows and unlocked them, bracing my shoulder against them to stop them from flying open. The effort was wasted, for as I carefully drew the windows inward and stepped through them on to the balcony the pounding of the sea subsided, died away in a moment, *and I gazed out upon a scene of unbelievable calm!*

I frankly could not believe my eyes, and the shock of the sight beyond the balcony the near-distant sea, flat and silvery in clear moonlight, the rippled sands stretching away beneath a night sky across which, diaphanous and eerily silent, scattered wisps of cloud slowly drifted—caused me to reel with its almost physical intensity following, as it did, so rapidly in the wake of the imagined storm.

For of course that tempest of my dreams had existed purely in my imagination, had carried over like an echo from the subconscious caverns of my mind into the waking world during the transitory phase between sleeping and waking proper. I had not been fully awake, even though I had left my bed to go into my study, and only the cold night air of the balcony had brought me to my senses.

It was the whisky, of course, only the whisky. That could be the only possible explanation. But following so closely on the events of the last 24 hours, and despite all rationalizations, the alcohol-inspired nightmare had left me utterly shaken. Trembling in every limb, I went back inside and began automatically to close the windows; and it was then that a terrifying thought came to me.

Wasn’t there some sort of disease that started off with symptoms like mine? With wild imaginings and hallucinations? With fainting spells and giddy bouts, and periods of awful whirling and rushing sensations? Where

the victim’s sense of hearing becomes so acute that in the end he dies or goes mad from the sheer pressure of supposed or imagined noise? Or was this merely some theory I had read or heard of somewhere or other? It was all very worrying.

So worrying, indeed, that my sleeping was done with for the rest of that night. Instead I prowled the house through all the remaining dark hours, putting on the lights as I went pale and sickly from room to room, until dawn found me near-exhausted from a sort of frustrated fretting and the recounting over and over of all that had passed since first the New England conch came into my possession.

It was then that something Sarah had said came back to me, what she had reported some doctor or other as remarking of my condition: that I was close to being in a state of nervous exhaustion. Well, possibly, but frankly that was the only thing she said that had made any sort of sense. Nervous exhaustion? Much more of this and I might well begin to consider myself a candidate for the local asylum.

… Asylum?

I frowned as a new thought occurred to me. An asylum!

Could it possibly be that the club on the beach was some sort of sanatorium? Now, with dawn spreading bright fingers over the sky and the fears of the night receding along with my mood of alcoholic depression, it seemed to me that I might well have stumbled across the truth.

Was it possible that the ‘club’ was no club at all but a retreat from the rigours of a world too harsh for the delicate minds of certain persons—certain extremely well-to-do persons—whose ‘eccentricities’ had carried them over the edge? If so, then naturally the place would have its staff of attendants, one of whom had tended me when I had been taken ill on the premises.

The more I thought about it in the clear light of day, the more logically the pieces of the puzzle seemed to slip into place. The location of the refuge was certainly out of the way, as one might expect; its ‘residents’ patently were the owners and had a hand in the running of the place; but at the same time the staff—doubtless well-qualified and highly paid—must always be there in the background to ensure the safety of their charges, their employers.

How then would Sarah Bishop fit into this conjectural jigsaw I was constructing? Thinking of her father and what I had seen of him, I was more

convinced than ever that I was on the right track, that indeed the Bishops fit in extremely well. The old man's case was plainly advanced, and doubtless complicated by an extreme physical disorder; but worse by far from my point of view was the fact that his mental condition must be hereditary. For surely Sarah, too, suffered those same delusions that obsessed her father, had absorbed and adopted his harmless but deranged opinions and concepts.

As for David Semple: had not my old friend Ian Carling warned me that Semple was "a queer sort of chap", however likeable he was in his own way? On the man's own admission he was a collector of all sorts of weird and wonderful books, specializing in volumes dealing with the occult and esoteric. And without a shadow of a doubt those books that he had showed me were strange enough.

Moreover (and as is often the case with deranged people), Semple had been remarkably quick off the mark to point out old man Bishop's much more obvious deterioration; the fact that he was 'not quite right', and that it had to do with his 'age and condition'. But I knew that Mr Bishop was only sixty-seven years old; hardly an age at which advanced senility might normally be expected to take over or exact so drastic a toll…

Oh, to be sure, there were ambiguities and inconsistencies in my reasoning. There was, for instance, the question of the Innsmouth Marshes and their obscure connection with the club; and the fact that Semple had found a genuine reference to the New England conch in one of his many books; and the odd circumstance of my meeting with Sarah Bishop in the first place. But here I must surely make allowance for pure coincidence.

By this time I had convinced myself that I was right, and as additional proof I thought again of those strange and emotionless faces I had seen grouped about the great table where I had sat down to lunch with Sarah Bishop and the other members of … no, the other inmates. I thought of those faces and how similar they had seemed, as of a single family, the way the features of sufferers from mongolism appear similar, as self-identifying as any retarded group when seen against a normal background—as I had often seen them myself on outings in the streets of London and other cities, carefully shepherded and conducted by their attendants.

Yes, that must be the answer. The club was an asylum for a group of people who had themselves recognized and taken precautions against the encroachment of their own infirmities. They were in no way dangerous lunatics, merely sick people whose mental deterioration—probably a

gradual process in most of them—had demanded a haven wherein they might periodically find respite when the going got too rough for them.

And Sarah, poor Sarah … No wonder she had felt outraged when I had called the others “degenerate”. In her heart of hearts she must know well enough the truth, which she had tried, in her own way, to tell me: that they were merely “different”. No wonder I had thought the girl strange and wondered at the way she looked at me! She had offered me friendship (and, I suspected, much more than friendship) which I had seemed so callously to throw back in her face. And yet, now that I had guessed the facts of the matter, perhaps my failure to accept her had been just as well at that…

Having thought the thing out more or less to my satisfaction, finally I was reminded of the conch. It must be in Semple’s room where I had left it. Well, it was still my property, and I wanted it back. Not that I could see any sort of argument brewing over its possession, but the sooner it was returned to me the better. Then, for the first time, I noticed a scrap of paper tucked under the handset of my telephone. There was a number on it, and a bold signature reading “Sarah Bishop”.

I nodded to myself in understanding: obviously she had foreseen the outcome of her telling me her “story”. And she had said that I should know where to find her when I was ready to apologize. But it was too early in the day just yet, I fancied, to attempt to contact her. And in any case, having worked the nervous tension out of my system—not to mention a large overdose of alcohol—I now found myself inordinately weary. Easier in my mind, I decided to try for a few hours’ sleep and speak to Sarah later.

I had not reckoned on sleeping any great length of time, but my exhaustion was such that it put me down well over the allowed-for period, with the result that I did not open my eyes again until early evening. On reflection, however, it was not difficult to see why I had needed to sleep my fill: the previous day’s stresses and excitements—followed by periods of drug- and alcohol-induced unconsciousness of doubtful restorative value, and terminating in a nightmare and half a night spent in enervating prowling—had completely sapped my strength. Now, following a shower and a shave, a bite of food and glass of fruit juice, I felt up to just about anything …

The first problem came when I phoned the number Sarah had left for me and got Sargent on the other end of the wire. He was polite but almost completely inarticulate, and it was not without a deal of difficulty that I

eventually discovered Sarah to be sleeping (she had left instructions that she was not to be roused until 9 p.m.) and Semple to be “away on business but returning later”.

Then, when I would have put the phone down, the man surprised me by enquiring after my well-being, and by stating that ‘the doctor’ had asked that I be informed of his availability should I require any further attention. I answered that all now seemed perfectly well with me, but asked that the doctor be thanked for his kind offer anyway, and with that replaced the receiver.

I spent a further half hour at my desk, fidgeting and fiddling with an old, heavily corrected and interlineated manuscript, and only succeeded in ruining it completely, after which I threw down my pencil and resolved to return to the place on the beach at once. I had reasons enough, to be sure. I desired to retrieve the conch; I would welcome the opportunity to excuse my peculiar behaviour of yesterday before as many of the club’s ‘members’ as possible; and last but not least I must certainly apologize to Sarah for my regrettable lack of manners, and any other “offences” against her sensibilities of which she might consider me guilty.

Having made up my mind, I attempted to phone for Seaham’s lone taxi, but after dialling for ten minutes gave it up for a bad job. Obviously, Sam Hadley, the owner of a battered old Ford of incredible mileage and stamina, was already out on a job. Since Sam never allowed himself to be engaged for long journeys (Newquay was about as far as he would go) I decided to walk into the village and try my luck at finding him in when I reached his cottage on the seafront.

It was not quite 6.30 p.m. when I set out, and while it was still broad daylight I noted that a pale sun was already slipping down toward the sea. The chill of evening was creeping in while the shadows of rocks and pebbles gradually lengthened on the beach. In less than two hours it would be quite dark.

Twenty minutes later, I was at Sam’s place at the northern tip of the decaying concrete promenade. The old Ford was not in its accustomed place, and Sam, a bachelor, was not at home. The sign which he normally kept in his window, saying simply “Taxi”, was missing. I knocked at his door just to be sure, and as I was turning away Sam’s ancient next—door neighbour, Jason Ridley, appeared at his door and called across to me:

“Urn's gorn inter Newquay, Mr. Vollister. Gettin’ some repairs done to the old bus, I reckon. Be late in fer sure. Should I tell urn you was ’ere?”

“No, don’t bother yourself, Jason,” I answered. “It’s not important. I’m just out for a walk, that’s all.”

“Walkin' is it? On the beach? Tide’s cumin in. Are you goin’ far, sir?”

“Oh, no—up the beach, that’s all. As far as the, er, new place. The boat place, you know?” I started to walk away. “That there queer place, d’you mean?”

Now I stopped and turned back towards the old man. “Queer place, Jason? What do you mean?”

“Ar, urn’s a funny old place, um is. Bought the little bay outright, um did, an' dun’t let no un near um along the beach. Private property, um says it is. Funny lot.”

“But you said ‘queer’, Jason. Now what did you mean by that?”

“Well,” he drawled, “You know, sir—kind of vacant, um be, Fishy lookin’ lot.”

“Vacant? You mean you think they’re simple or something?”

“Simple? Like a bit balmy, d'you mean? Oh, I wouldn’t go that far, sir. A bit queer, that’s all. Still urn’s an out of the way place, an' um dun’t seem ter bother no um. Sam Hadley does a fair bit o’ trade wi um …”

But now it seemed that our brief chat had soured the old chap and he began to turn away from me. “Yes,” I answered, nodding. “Well, then—that’s all right, then.”

He seemed not to have heard me, however, and went back into his cottage, mumbling to himself and shaking his head from side to side. Old Jason was a bit of a funny old duck himself, come to think of it. Still, he had more or less confirmed my own suspicions. “A queer sort of place”, indeed.

That settled it; I couldn’t leave the New England conch at the club, but must get it back immediately. It should take me no more than an hour or so to walk to the club, and with a bit of luck I might even get David Semple to drive me home again. Briskly I set out…

Thirty minutes later the shadows had lengthened appreciably. Already, in a sky which was slowly clouding over, I thought I could make out the first gleam of stars as the sun began to sink in the sea. There would be a thin moon tonight, but I should be at the club before dark.

Now the shadows of the cliffs on my right drove me farther down the beach until I walked on the high-water mark between sea and crags. The sea itself was fairly calm and would not be up for half an hour or more, and in any case there were few places where a man might find himself trapped by the water along this stretch of the coast.

Shortly, as I put on a little speed and lengthened my stride, I noticed that indeed the stars were fast appearing, and that the sun was now down beyond the sea's horizon. An aircraft, flying high over the ocean, was caught in the last rays of the sun and magically transformed into a silent, speeding silver dart. Then it passed behind a hummocked cloud formation and was gone.

Suddenly I felt a chill and shuddered—not alone, I fancied, from the effects of a freshening breeze off the sea. There was an eeriness about the sands at night, an aching loneliness. And the ocean's hush, hush where it rolled gently against the land was so regular as to be almost hypnotic. Too, it seemed to be growing dark far too early; or perhaps it was simply that the clouds were gathering and I had misjudged the distance between Seaham and the place on the beach.

Then, ahead, I spied the southernmost bay-arm where its outcrop jutted towards the slowly surging sea. Another ten minutes should see me rounding that natural breakwater, when I would be within a hundred yards of the … sanatorium? And now, too, at this late hour, I began to think of what I was doing in a different and somewhat morbid light.

For here was I alone on the beach, with night fast-falling and the tide creeping ever closer, and just ahead lay my destination—a mental institution of sorts, however well-disguised—whose inmates were, to say the very least, disquieting. Oh, doubtless I would be attended to by one of the staff, a night nurse I supposed, and in all likelihood I would be on my way again within minutes, possibly in David Semple's car; but still I could not rid my mind's eye of a certain recurrent picture: that of a circle of staring, bulge-eyed, not quite vacant faces that gazed at one oddly, almost expectantly. And again, despite all rationalizations, I shuddered as I recalled those incidents which had led up to my fainting fit in the presence of the sanatorium's peculiar inhabitants.

So preoccupied was I with these recollections of mine that at first, as I turned my feet seaward in order to skirt the outcrop of rock which formed the arm of the bay, I almost failed to notice a movement in the shadows at

the foot of the crags to my right. And although by now the moon was up, silvering the sea a little and casting some small illumination in previously stygian places, still I believe that it was pure intuition—or premonition—that brought the hackles upright at the base of my neck and made me look back.

Hadn’t old Jason Ridley told me something about the people at the sanatorium not letting anyone near the place? Could it be that they had guards out? A sensible precaution, surely.

And yes, there was movement there, but not, I thought, the sort that a man might make. It was a strange slithering motion at the foot of the outcrop behind me, a humping of darkness that seemed to bulge threateningly in my direction. For a moment I paused, stopped breathing, and stared hard into the shadows, and in that same moment clouds passed over the moon and plunged the beach into darkness. Instantly the shadows of the cliffs and those of the sharp, weed-festooned rocks lengthened and seemed to leap at me across sands already dark, and I could sense a tensing in the night like a bunching of alien muscles.

Then the clouds passed, the moon's weak beam began to creep over the beach once more, the shadows retreated, and I knew that I had only been reacting to a bad attack of nerves, and that there was nothing there at the foot of the rocks after all—

—except that there was!

I thought at first it was a rock—a lone, bulky rock standing up from the sand taller than a man between me and the outcrop proper—and I had taken a deep, thankful breath of air and had started to turn away, to resume walking towards the point … when suddenly the thing moved! Its outline changed, seemed to flow; its base thickened, made a motion like the contraction of the foot of a slug, a movement that brought it closer to me; its lumpy surface glittered in the thin moonlight as if studded with a hundred shining eyes …

Great God in heaven, they were eyes!

This thing couldn’t be, not possibly. And yet even as I stumbled away from it, backing across the sand, it made that motion again, and came closer. I heard a noise then—the sucking, squelching sound a sea-squirt makes when probed with a finger until it ejects its juices, but magnified a hundred times—and at that precise moment the clouds obscured the moon once more.

My God! Was it those poor people at the place on the beach who were demented, or was it I? For this was surely the stuff of a madman's nightmare. But sane or mad as a hatter, I could not bear the sight of that blackly looming monstrosity coming at me out of the night, and I uttered a strangled scream—more the choked, inarticulate, rasping gasp of an animal half-crazed with fear—as I leapt backwards away from the horror.

Finally, volition returning more fully, I spun away from the thing, fell, scrambled to my feet, and fled towards the point of rocks with a pounding heart and lungs which already felt as if they were ready to burst. Nearing the point, I dared to look back, and saw the thing flowing after me, upright, leaning towards me, a column of lumpy loathsomeness.

A moment more, and my feet splashed in water, another and I tripped, flying forward into a deepening pool. This was a permanent pool about the rocks that formed the point, freshened and replenished with each tide, and it should not be too deep. Mercifully, my clothing was light and impeded me not at all. I swam like never before.

Drawing level with the last rock and beginning to swim round it to enter the bay proper, as I suddenly stumbled upright in water which had shallowed off to a depth of only a few feet, fearfully I looked back. At first I saw nothing, then a movement—a *flowing* as of a thick shadow at the far side of the pool—a shadow that lumped itself together and grew upright like a black stalagmite of hell at the water's edge. And again those myriad glittering eyes fixed me. Then I was round the point, plunging again into deeper water, feeling the slow surge and lift of a current that told me the sea had finally joined with and was filling the pool.

The lights of the sanatorium were ablaze and there was movement about its raised front, but I was far too winded to cry out for help. Lying partly between myself and the building, rolling gently where it was moored, the dark outline of a forty—foot craft lay low in the water, a dim cabin light burning with an orange glow. On the beach within the small bay itself, a tractor-like vehicle—by its appearance a dumper or loader of some sort—moved towards the building, headlights ablaze. I had no time to worry over this seemingly inordinate activity, however; I quickly swam to the boat and hauled myself aboard.

Tarpaulins had been folded back to uncover the well of the prow, where doubtless a cargo of sorts had lain. Perhaps something was even now in the process of being unloaded. Well, the vehicle moving up the beach had made

its last run of the night, for plainly the water was now too deep for another load to be taken off the boat. The sea was pouring in now and quickly filling the pool.

Then, as the boat leaned over sharply in the strengthening surge of water, and the glowing cabin light cast its beam upon what was left of the cargo, I saw—

—an impossible sight!

I staggered—partly from the shock of what I believed I had seen, partly from the heaving of the boat's deck—stumbling across the planking and grasping at the ropes of the tarpaulins to steady myself as I fell heavily against the port side. There I crouched, waiting for the light to shine once more into the well of the deck; and all but forgotten, now, the horror on the beach.

For I had to see it again, the cargo of this lolling vessel whose captain, apparently, had gone ashore for the night. And again, obligingly, the boat leaned over to show me its secret: a shallow hold still half-full of wetly gleaming seashells. Ah, but these were not mussels, no, neither were they oysters nor whelks, nor any of the familiar, edible variety of molluscs one might expect to find in a vessel along this coast.

They were conches of the same species as my 'unique' New England specimen, and they lay in their thousands alive and sluggishly mobile in the well of this suddenly loathsome craft!

What happened next consists mainly of dim and fragmentary memories, which is perhaps as well. I turned my face over the side of the boat as a sudden bout of nausea filled me. The vessel lay so low in the water that for a moment my face was mirrored in the dark surface of the sea. It was the abrupt *parting* of that liquid mirror image that brought the single shriek of absolute terror bursting from my lips—

—that and the bulge—eyed, thick—lipped, scaled and monstrous head which emerged in a toss of spray—and the hand that reached up to grasp my shoulder, the *webbed* hand that jerked me irresistibly overboard and into the slowly heaving waters!

As I went, my head struck the side of the boat with a force which mercifully robbed me of the last vestige of an already reeling consciousness …

IV: The Tank

Awakening from a submarine nightmare in which I fought desperately to control lungs which threatened to burst at every moment while being pursued through mazy, coral-incrusted deeps by both the horror from the beach and the batrachian *thing* that had dragged me overboard and into the sea, I found myself straining frantically against fetters which bound me hand and foot. I was on my back in an utterly lightless place, and a wide band of leather or some similar material had been fastened over my chest to restrict my movements further. While my head ached abominably and my limbs seemed a little cramped, doubtless as a result of their immobilization, I did not believe myself seriously injured in any way; and I satisfied myself in this respect by carefully moving my arms, legs, hands, and head as best I might within their limits. Whatever the monster had been which had dragged me into the water, obviously it had seen fit to drag me out again before I could drown. What had happened after that, where I was at the present time, and what my circumstances were *exactly* … these were things upon which I could not hazard even to speculate.

Of certain things, however, I could now be sure: that there was much more to Sarah Bishop's story—much more to the 'club' on the beach and to the whole chain of weird coincidences, if indeed they had been coincidences, which had led me to my present position—than ever I had suspected. And as for 'my present position' itself:

My clothes were not wet, but only slightly damp, which told me that I had been out of the water for some time. Nevertheless, I knew that I was not far removed from the sea, for I could still hear the hush, hush of its incursion on the land, though somehow the sound seemed strangely hollow and mechanical, as if I heard it through some amplifying medium, or as if I myself now occupied an enclosed space which gave the sound a metallically amplified ring. The surface on which I lay was not solid: that is to say it had a certain resilience, now stretched almost to its limits by my weight and the additional pressure of whichever appliance held me immobile. In short, I lay upon a fairly wide bed of one sort or another.

Sudden panic gripped me. A bed? It felt more like an operating table, or maybe a couch specially constructed to withstand the furious strength of a madman. And no sooner had this thought occurred to me than I further pictured myself in some sort of cell—a *padded* cell—in the sanatorium on the beach!

For a few moments I struggled wildly against my bonds, until a sort of cold and calculating calm began to creep over my mind and I forced myself to relax. Patently I was the captive of … someone. Of people or beings of some sort. Or, if not their captive, then … their ward? Inmate of some institute for the mentally deranged? The horrible fact of the matter was that the latter alternative was not at all out of the question. I had seen and experienced things which simply could not be in any sane or ordered universe; I had suffered subconscious hallucinations, nightmares which had carried over into my waking hours; and, finally, I had apparently become the victim or captive of beings which I had believed were born purely of the imaginings of others, themselves deranged.

Or could it be that all my previous conclusions were incorrect? That Sarah Bishop's story was a wholly true version of the way things were and that her friends and companions at the place on the beach were not mental patients at all but … something else? For surely the mere fact that I could now lie here and attempt some sort of rationalization was adequate proof of my own sanity; and yet, on the other hand, if I were sane how might I explain that living, sentient pile of sludge I had seen on the beach? Whatever other anomalies I might eventually find myself obliged to accept, *that* thing would never number amongst them!

Then, breaking in on my confused thoughts, from somewhere fairly close at hand there came the low mechanical cough of an engine starting up, followed by its steady purr as muffled pumps began to labour. Seconds later, I heard the gurgling of water and felt a dull vibration that reached me through the surface on which I lay. Before I could consider the meaning of these new sounds or return to my previous train of thought, a light went on immediately above me in the darkness, momentarily blinding me.

I closed my eyes at once, turning my head to one side and peering through shuttered lids until my eyes became accustomed to the glare. A little while later, I could see that I was in … some sort of tank?

A tank, yes, a metal room—a windowless room, the interior of which wore the dull grey sheen of metal—in the walls of which were rounded, protruding heads of rivets and thickly welded seams where panels had been joined. Apart from its cubical structure, the cell might well have been the interior of some great ship's boiler; plainly it had not been designed to house human beings.

Set flush in the far wall I saw an inlet pipe of at least nine inches in diameter from which, even as I watched, a trickle of water began to enter the tank. Rapidly the flow increased until the water actually gushed from this large inlet. Then, turning my head even further and craning my neck to stare at the metal floor, I saw that the water was filling a sunken area of the tank which was all of four or five feet deeper than the floor space where stood my bed or platform. As of yet, of course, the purpose of the whole set-up completely escaped me, but it seemed unlikely that the intention was to drown me. That could have been achieved earlier and far more easily.

Turning my head in the other direction and avoiding the glare of the single bulb that hung unshaded from the ‘ceiling’, I saw in the nearer wall an oval metal door similar to the type found below decks and between bulkheads in ocean-going vessels. On my side of the door, however, there did not appear to be any mechanism for opening it. A wooden chair stood beside my bed, and in one corner I could see a portable lavatory of the kind used in caravans. Other than these few items the tank was quite bare and empty. The ceiling was perhaps nine feet high (thirteen in the sunken area) and the walls were square in plan, about fifteen feet in length.

Having studied as much as I could of the tank, I next turned my attention to my bonds, and was in the futile process of once more trying my muscles against them when there came a grating sound that drew my eyes back to the oval door. The grating stopped, was followed by a loud clang as of metal against metal, and slowly the door began to open. Well oiled, the hinges were soundless as the heavy door swung inward to reveal—Sargent!

With surprising agility for one who had previously seemed little more than a shambling hulk, the man stepped over the raised portal into the tank. In his hand he carried a heavy flashlight, which he switched off before approaching me where I lay. He blinked his eyes in the glare of the single bulb. Wherever I was, it had to be dark outside. Sargent came closer, nodding, offering me his emotionless smile. Then the not-quite-vacant grin slipped from his face as he tested my bonds and checked to see that I was completely immobilized.

While he was engaged in this task, I took the opportunity to study him closely, looking particularly at his face (especially his eyes) and at his large, rough hands. What it was I sought I could not have said for a certainty at that time. I only knew that somewhere deep within me a seed of

apprehension had blossomed into a loathing—a morbid dread—of certain types of human physiognomy.

Sargent had that look, or at least something of it, for in him it did not seem quite … complete. Semple had it, too, but again unfinished. Now my thoughts flashed back to the car park at the top of the cliffs above the club, to the American car which had pulled away as I had arrived with Semple. I saw again the lumpish, shadowy, pallid-faced figures whose round eyes had gazed at me in the moment that their car drove off, and I knew now what it was that had so disturbed me about them.

It was that look which all of these people shared, the one thing above all others that they had in common and *which had been carried to* the *ultimate degree in the monstrous form of the creature that snatched me from the boat!* Though I could not have known it then, these characteristics I had come to fear so greatly were known as the “Innsmouth Look”, and they were a stigma born of a primal evil which—

But that is to go ahead of myself…

Apparently satisfied that I was well and truly tied down, Sargent offered me his simpleton’s smile and said: “The doctor is coming, Mr. Vollister. No need to worry. You’re one of the lucky ones.”

Until now, I had been silent, staring at him in a stony fashion, unwilling to display any sign of fear. His words, however incongruous, now broke my dam of silence and I railed at him:

“Doctor? I don’t need a doctor, Sargent. I’m not a patient—I’m a prisoner! No need to worry, you say! And I'm one of the lucky ones, am I? Man, you’ll know what the words lucky and unlucky mean before I’m through. I’ll have the police down on this place quicker than you can say —”

“Police?” he cut me off, that hideous smile disappearing in a moment. “No police, Mr. Vollister. You're with friends.”

“*Friends?*” I exploded, gritting my teeth as I again strained at my bonds. “Did you say friends, Sargent? What the hell are you? A pack of crazy people—or worse than crazy—to tie me down and lock me in this damned … *tank?* My friends, you say? When I get out of this place, I'll—”

“No,” again he cut me off, shaking his scraggly head of hair slowly from side to side. “No, you don’t get out, Mr. Vollister. Not for a long time. Before very long you won't want to get out, and that’s best. You’re with friends.”

I stared hard at him, trying to divine his expression, his meaning, but his face was now completely blank. No, there was an expression of sorts there, but I couldn't quite make it out. Could it possibly have been—envy? But how might anyone have envied me in my position? I might have questioned him then, or at least attempted to talk to him in a more reasonable manner, but even as I began to consider my approach there came the tread of feet on boards from beyond the oval metal door.

In another moment the darkness outside was slashed by the probing beam of a torch, following which a dark—suited figure appeared at the door, peering into the tank before entering. A squat man, froggish in figure but not (I was happy to note) in feature; his face, head, and hands looked normal, or at least comparatively so. In one hand he carried a bag—a doctor's bag—and certainly his manner was that of a professional physician.

"Ah, Mr. Vollister," he said. "We meet again, and sooner than either of us had suspected, eh?" He chuckled, a perfectly normal chuckle, and reached to check the pulse in my wrist. Instinctively, I tried to pull back from him. He paused, pursed his lips, and made tut-tutting sounds. "Nerves, Mr. Vollister?"

I could stand no more of it. "Look," I almost shouted, "what's going on here? For God's sake, what's it all about? You look normal enough—which is more than I can say for anyone else around here—so can't we just hold a normal conversation?"

He released my wrist. "Of course we can," he answered, beaming delightedly and seating himself on the wooden chair. "Indeed, we've been waiting until you were more receptive. Now, at last, it seems you want to know about us. Fine! Do you have questions? If so, ask away."

"All right," I answered, feeling hysteria rising in me like a wind. "Who the hell are 'we', exactly, and what is this place? And for heaven's sake … I saw something on the beach—something horrible—a *Thing!* And the shells—those conches in their thousands!" Now I babbled unashamedly and struggled once more to break free of my bonds.

"Am I mad or something?" I yelled. "I don't understand what's going on! Is this an asylum or isn't it? Damn you—damn you all!—what have I done to you? Who the devil are you, anyway?"

While I raved, the "doctor" had taken a hypodermic from his bag. Now he tested it and, as I once more tried to shrink away from him, said: "Calm

yourself, Mr. Vollister. All of your questions will be answered … soon. But at the present time you're simply too excitable. Of one thing, however, you may rest assured, which is that you are among friends. And you are most certainly not mad!" He nodded to Sargent, who came forward and quickly rolled up my sleeve.

I caught my breath as my eyes fixed upon the glinting needle the doctor held. Then I cried: "Keep that filthy thing away from me!"

"A sedative, Mr. Vollister." He tried to calm me. "Only a sedative. And when you wake up there'll be someone here to tell you all you want to know."

"But how? … What? … Who?" I whispered, feeling the sting of the needle as it went home. He leaned closer, and in a matter of seconds his face became blurred and distorted. Through lips already numb I managed to ask: "Who are you?"

"We are your friends," he answered from a million miles away, his voice echoing down a long, long tunnel. "Your friends, the Deep Ones!"

Whatever the nature of the doctor's "sedative", its effect could not be denied. And yet it did not produce total unconsciousness in me, merely a sort of drowsy numbness through which I was dimly aware of my surroundings but incapable of any sort of movement or even of constructive thought. On the other hand, my memory was only marginally affected, so that later I was able to recall almost everything of visits made to the tank and of conversations held over me or in my presence**.**

I especially remembered Sarah coming to see me, but such was the erotic nature of her visit that I later assumed myself to have dreamed that particular episode. It was too absurd, I thought, to be anything other than a dream: that this young woman should come to me, alone, release my fetters and rouse me to a pitch of sexual desire in order to make love to me!—and all this while I was a prisoner, drugged, and only dimly aware of what she was about. Oh, yes, certainly a dream.

Of the other visits, however, I was less certain. There was inherent in them a certain stealth, and to the whispered conversations which accompanied them a sinister element that reached me even through the fog of drug-induced lethargy which deadened my senses and perceptions. I heard the peculiar and distinctive voice of Sarah's father, together with the

unctuous tones of “the doctor”, and felt hands upon me that turned me this way and that while examining me minutely.

During one such discussion I suffered a probing of expert fingers in the region of my neck, following which there was a mention of ‘undeveloped buds’ (which I took to be a reference to the subcutaneous nodules I have had since boyhood, produced by continuous gland troubles in my teens), while an examination of my hands and feet seemed to produce evidence of ‘a retarded but not inconsiderable webbing’.

And that was not all. My eyes were subjected to bright lights and my skin to a certain abrasion—not to mention a series of punctures by needles whose purpose I was incapable even of trying to guess—following which a blood sample was taken and the initial phase of my ordeal was over. Then, over a period of what must have been several hours, slowly my body was allowed to fight off the gradually diminishing effects of whichever drugs I had been subjected to and I was allowed to surface to the grim reality of the tank. Conditions, however, seemed to have improved.

I was naked of clothing now, but warm, dry, and comfortable between clean sheets and beneath soft blankets. My clothes were folded neatly and lay in a small pile at the foot of my bed. The light was on, shaded now, and by its light I saw that Sarah was with me, sitting on the chair beside me.

I looked at her through half-lowered lids, noting the pensive look on her face and the tension in her hands where they held one of mine. She seemed lost in thought and was not aware of my return to consciousness until I withdrew my hand from hers. Whatever her feelings for me, and however real her concern, she was obviously in league with my gaolers and therefore an enemy. Surely she must know that I would reject any pretensions of friendship? If so, then the look of pain which crossed her face as I withdrew my hand was marvellously well feigned.

Then, as I opened my eyes fully to stare at her accusingly, she masked her feelings to ask: “John Vollister, why on earth did you have to precipitate things by coming back here—along the beach and at that time of night?”

“I came to get my shell back,” I lamely answered, finding my throat dry and painful and my voice unexpectedly weak. “And I came to offer my apologies, not only to you but to the others here, and also to … oh, there were reasons enough. But I certainly didn’t expect to be taken prisoner and locked in this place!”

She gave me that curious look of hers. “Why did you really come, John? Because of our argument, our quarrel? Did you come to see me?”

I grunted in answer, unwilling to admit that she had probably hit upon the truth. “That was part of it, I suppose,” I eventually agreed. “I wanted to make sure that you were, well, *all right,* here. I thought that—”

“That we were all mad?” Her voice, not unkind, was nevertheless full of barely restrained amusement. “Doctor Waite said as much. He also said you had many questions to ask, and that he believed you would now be more receptive to the truth.”

“The truth?” I laughed hoarsely. “But that’s *all* I’m interested in!”

“John, why don’t you just listen to me,” her tone changed, becoming almost pleading as she again took my hand and squeezed it, “and this time try to accept what you’re told. One way or the other, you *will* accept it in the end. So far, you’ve incurred no penalties, you owe us no penance, but if you persist in resisting our every—”

“Penance?” I broke in. “Am I some sort of criminal, then? Have I broken the law? Funny, I was feeling more sinned against than sinner! As for my "resistance”: does it really surprise you that I object to being kept in captivity?”

She pursed her lips. “Why are you so stubborn? If only you’d *listen!*”

“I keep listening!” I almost shouted, trying to sit up and discovering that, while my bonds had been removed, my body was now as weak as my voice, far too drained of strength to effect any sudden or violent movement. “I keep listening,” I repeated more quietly, collapsing back on to my pillows, “but nothing I hear makes any sense. Why not just tell me where I fit into all of this—whatever it is you’re doing—without any sort of embroidery?”

“You’ve already been told the truth—” she answered, “or at least the basic facts—if only you would accept them …”

“You mean all of that … all you told me about a subaqueous race of—”

“Amphibious,” she quickly corrected me.

“Right, a race of amphibians, dwelling for the most part in the sea, with their own submarine cities and religions and

“All of that, yes,” she once more broke in. “But listen, John, this is getting us nowhere. I’m not the best qualified person to explain everything. They tried to tell me that before, but I wouldn't listen. David Semple is the expert.”

“Semple? What about him?” I asked, revulsion flooding over me as I thought of the man and of my first impressions of him.

“He’ll be coming to see you after I leave,” she told me, “and you’ll be able to study under him. As to why you’re being kept here—“against your will”, if you insist—it’s simply that we can't afford to let the outside world know too much about us or get the wrong picture of us just yet. And you’ve already seen things you weren’t supposed to know about until much later. In modern jargon, we’re still very much a "minority group”, and we know the sort of opposition we’d be up against. We just can’t afford to let you go running free and perhaps bring all sorts of people down on us. Don’t you see? They would be no more willing to understand, believe, or listen to us than you have been.”

“But—”

She shook her head, releasing my hand and standing up. “My time’s up, John. I’ll be back—you know I will—but now it’s David’s turn.” The pleading look returned to her eyes. “Only please, *please* try to help him as much as you can. Don’t give us any more trouble. It will only rebound on you, and I couldn’t bear that. Now I have to go …”

She turned away and went to the door, lifting her hand as if to rap upon its metal oval. Then she paused and turned to face me. She seemed about to say something, but no words came.

“Sarah,” I prompted her, “what is it you want with me?”

She answered. “You … remember, don’t you, John?”

And at once I knew her meaning. Our eyes met, and it flashed between us like a spark of some weird energy, so that I immediately felt a longing in me. “I thought it must be a dream,” I told her, then paused before asking: “And before—at my house?”

She nodded. “Then, too, yes.”

“Not that I’m not flattered,” I said, “but why? I mean, I’m old enough to be your father.”

She gave me that curious look of hers yet again, and shook her head. “That doesn’t matter,” she answered. “It doesn’t matter now, and it will have no importance at all … later.”

“Oh? There’s to be a ‘later’, is there?”

“Yes, plenty of time later,” she answered with a strange little laugh. “Years and years of it. Hundreds of them!” Then she rapped on the door, and when it opened she stepped through and was gone.

A moment later, Semple entered. In his arms he bore a dozen thick loose-leaf binders. Sargent came after him with a light folding table which he opened up before leaving, closing the door behind him. Placing his binders on the table, Semple drew up the chair and sat down. He nodded an almost perfunctory greeting, selected a binder, opened it, and began …

And so, without any further objection or resistance, I listened and learned. Before he began to instruct me in his main subject, however, Semple—whose presence now aroused in me an even greater revulsion—"put my mind at rest" by advising me in respect of one or two things which he suspected might have been bothering me.

Six days had gone by, he told me, since my lone and utterly stupid return to the place on the beach. That was where I was now, in one of three great tanks whose bases were buried in the rocks and sand of the beach, situated beneath and behind the concrete legs that supported the front of the building. Eventually, a channel would be cut from the pool—like basin in front of the club to the permanent natural pool at the mouth of the bay. At each tide, the huge containers would automatically flush and refill themselves with fresh sea water (a process whose purpose Semple did not see fit to explain, except to say that the tanks were 'storage and transfer chambers', and that they had not been designed as prisons, though plainly they were ideally suited to such a use) which at present could only be accomplished by the use of pumps.

During my six days of captivity I had been kept sedated, washed, shaved, and fed, the latter minimally—only sufficient food and water to keep me alive, which explained my somewhat dehydrated condition—and I had undergone a series of "tests". Again, Semple did not attempt to explain the nature of these tests, nor did he mention the injections I had been given. I might have questioned him on these points, but Sarah had begged me not to hinder him or place any obstruction in his way … for my own sake. For the time being, I thought, it might be as well to follow her advice.

Semple had noted my interest when he mentioned how long I had been a prisoner at the club—the 'headquarters", as he referred to it—and he had smiled as if he could read my thoughts. No, he assured me, I would not be notified as missing, no matter how long I remained away from the house. Notes had been left and telephone calls had been made explaining my 'temporary absence', messages which could later be modified to meet any

situation as it arose. My newspaper had been cancelled, and even a finished manuscript had been sent off on my behalf to a publisher in London. I was simply holidaying somewhere in the north. Certain ‘friends’ in the village would obligingly put it about that I was considering a move to Scotland, so that even in the event of my complete vanishment only a modicum of curiosity would be aroused.

Then, with the preliminaries over and any hopes I might have entertained of outside intervention dashed, Semple got down to business; and his business was to convince me, completely and irrevocably, of the actuality of the Deep Ones and all Sarah Bishop had told me of them. His method was simple, direct, and comparatively undramatic, though the same could never be said of the effects of his disclosures on me. As for proof: he had photographs, documents—literature I could study with him or on my own—and, most convincing of all, he had himself, his own body, his own person. The last, however, together with my final acceptance of all I was to be told, did not come until the very end of my period of instruction, and that was not to be for at least a further three weeks. During that time I was to learn—and learn to believe—many things.

Right from the start of my schooling my days were divided in the following manner:

I would sleep (invariably under the influence of a combination of drugs) and on waking would be given food. This was usually fish of one sort or another, with water or occasionally wine to wash it down. Now and then, Sarah would come and take the odd meal with me, but she never stayed for long. Very infrequently I would wake to find her about to take her departure, having obviously been to bed with me. Sargent would also visit me periodically, presumably to ensure that all was well. But for all this visiting, I did have a degree of privacy. After each period of sleeping, and between visits, I would be left for several hours on my own to read and study the literature Semple left for me, and to exercise as best I might in the small space available. Later, Semple himself would come in for two or three hours to continue with my instruction. And the more I listened to him, the more sure I was that this thing I was somehow involved in was more than merely some vast, crazy fantasy.

And so I began to learn of the Deep Ones: those amphibian dwellers in the deeps whose existence has always been suspected by men, hinted at in myths and legends of mermen and maids come down the centuries, but

never proven. I learned how their race existed yet, in teeming thousands where their greatest cities stood, mere pockets or small submarine communities in other places, and discovered how, if only men knew exactly where to look, proof of their primordial existence as a high order of elder intellect predating Man could still be found.

I was told of sunken altars beneath the deep slime of Titicaca’s inner cone where the batrachian Priests of Yatta-Uc once worshipped the Great Old Ones five hundred thousand years ago; and it was explained to me how, though the Deep Ones of Yatta-Uc are no more, still their small cousins the frogs swarm as of old in the great lake's marshy fringes. I learned of an ages-extinct branch of the Deep Ones in which alien reptilian strains had spread to bring about the final decay and doom of that branch; and of the buried Nameless City in the desert, wherein the sundered remains of their primal sarcophagi may still be found. It was explained to me why, long aeons ago, in the Nan-Matal of the Carolines, the Deep Ones built their greatest cities and raised towering submarine shrines to the mighty gods of a fantastic pantheon; and I was told the location of a place where even now a secret door leads down to subterranean lakes unsuspected, where near-blind cavernicolous Deep Ones live out their spans in a dedicated priesthood whose bleakness would seem hellish even to the most austere of Man’s monkish orders.

All of this and much more, documented wherever possible and illustrated with incredibly detailed photographs, was made known to me; and as the days passed, I became heir to a veritable fund of lore lost to humanity for aeons—or, in the majority of cases, never even guessed at by the race of Man. I learned of R’lyeh, the mightiest fortress of indestructible stone whose drowned houses and temples were raised by neither men nor Deep Ones but by a race of beings come down from the stars when Earth was still partly plastic, and I gasped in awe of certain pictures of that massive necropolis from which, it was perfectly obvious, Mr. Bishop’s model had been constructed.

I saw immensely carved doors of fantastic proportions and dimensions, embossed with piscine and octopoid bas-reliefs and crusted with the oceanic debris of ages. I grew dizzy at elusive angles of architecture which formed surfaces at one and the same time convex and concave, or which changed from one to the other before one's eyes in the manner of optical illusions, from which I deduced that such photographs must in fact be real,

for no ordinary photographic equipment could fake visual effects such as these. But over and above all else the most striking thing about R'lyeh—even more astounding and awesome than its utterly alien, non-Euclidean architecture—was its sheer size, which, even without a scale of comparison, must surely have been megalithic to dwarf the pyramids. And this, Semple told me without a trace of humour in his voice, in his most matter-of-fact manner, was the merest tip of the actual city, the peak of a sunken mountain range that went down thousands of fathoms to the roots of the Pacific—Antarctic Ridge itself—all of which was R'lyeh!

"Oh, yes," he had asserted when I was unable to suppress an incredulous expression, "there are many thousands of square miles of cities beneath the silt on the bed of the Pacific. Even the Deep Ones do not know their full extent, or what secrets are still hidden down there. For remember, they are not cities of the Deep Ones but those of the Gods they worship …"

At a later date we spoke of the locations of extant Deep One cities and colonies. There was, of course, Y'ha-Nthlei off the coast of New England; and quite separate from the prehistoric piles of the Pacific already mentioned, there were still several substantial colonies scattered about Ponape. There were, too, certain settlements in the region of the Tongatupo Hole whose origins were immemorial, while six thousand miles to the north there was an expansive outpost even in the frigid deeps of the Aleutian Trench. Another city lay at the edge of the south—eastern Atlantic Basin, and yet another off Sumatra in the Indian Ocean. There hardly existed a body of water on the surface of the entire planet which did not know the presence of the Deep Ones, or had not known it at some time or other in the dim and abyssal past.

Even the comparatively shallow waters of the Mediterranean had their share of Deep Ones, in the form of a colony dwelling at the bottom of a hole unfathomed by men. "Oh. yes," Semple told me, "and they have been there since the beginning. You may rest assured that when Venus rose up from the waters near Paphos in Cyprus, men gazed upon a Deep One! She was that Aphrodite whose name they applied to the drugs which she distilled from the juices of certain conches, an art in which Deep Ones excel to this very day …"

At about this stage of my 'education' (I would guess that a week to ten days had passed since first Semple started working on me), I began to notice a peculiar and disturbing change taking place in the food that I was

eating. As I have said, my diet was mainly of fish prepared in a variety of ways, but the quality of the food's preparation had been gradually declining —or, rather, it was the *amount* of preparation that was in question. Quite simply, my food was uncooked and reaching me half raw. However much this fact was disguised in presentation, still I could tell from the texture and the taste of the stuff that only the merest pretence of cooking was being made.

When I protested to Semple, he replied: "I shouldn't make too much fuss, John Vollister. Next week you'll be catching your own food, right here," and he pointed to the sunken area of the tank, three—quarters full of sea water. "Fresh from the sea, my friend, rich and sweet and salty—so you'd better get used to the idea now!"

V: The Second Prisoner

When next he came to see me, Semple answered several questions that I had put to him from the first, all of which he had previously ignored. One of these was about the … creature? … I had seen on the nighted beach, which had pursued me like some gigantic, filthy slug on the night of my capture. It was, he told me, a shoggoth, a protomorphic slave of the Deep Ones, like a monstrous amoeba of tremendous strength and incredible adaptability, little more than a multi—purpose "engine" of the sort created in Predawn by the Great Old Ones to construct cities such as R'lyeh. According to Semple, several others of its kind were even now working in the Atlantic, building Ahu-Y'hloa in the depths of the ocean.

And I had been fortunate indeed, Semple further informed me, that the thing had not been given strict instructions in respect of unwanted visitors, for then I would most certainly have died, absorbed into the shoggoth, fuel for whichever alien fires drove the thing. As to why it had been there in the first place: that had been in the nature of an experiment, probably a mistake. Shoggoths did not make good watchdogs where human beings were concerned; they were better at their tasks of guarding R'lyeh's sunken tombs or labouring beneath the sea under the direction of the Deep Ones.

As for the manlike batrachian who had dragged me into the sea: that had been my first meeting with an almost wholly aquatic Deep One, a being born, bred, and in the main confined to the sea. He was of that sort employed by the more truly amphibious Deep Ones as escorts to ocean—

going vessels in their employ. As such and with several others of his kind, he had accompanied the boatload of conches during its voyage from “somewhere off Innsmouth” where the shells had been taken aboard to its destination at the place on the beach. The cargo of conches from Y'ha-Nthlei could not simply be unloaded into the sea near Ahu-Y’hloa (where eventually they were to perform their functions of cementing, polishing, and finishing the new buildings of that city), for they first required a very delicate form of ‘acclimatization’. This would involve their immersion in a special brine solution at a controlled temperature for some three weeks, after which they must be fed for a while with a variety of especially rich nutrients. That was why the shells had been unloaded from the boat to the building on the beach, where they now occupied the sunken area of one of the other tanks.

Furthermore, the molluscs had provided a delightful diversion in the diets of those at the beach headquarters, for they were indeed ‘a delicacy to the palates of the Deep Ones’, though ‘tainted’ was a word which Semple was no longer willing to use even in a derisory context. And it transpired that I myself had eaten of the flesh of the snail in a number of ‘salads’, but (as Semple pointed out) I had not seen fit to complain until recently, and even now not of the substance of my food but of its degree of preparation.

“Of course,” he had continued, “the conch is what you might like to call ‘a protected species’, for its reproductive cycle is very slow. But, as in the old times, still we ‘crop the slug with care’. You must consider yourself honoured that already you have tasted of its delicate flesh …”

The one thing that Semple would not disclose, no matter how often I might broach the subject, was the nature of the drugs which were still being given to me. Of them he would tell me no more than that they were “tranquillizers”, and that they were “merely a safety measure” under the influence of which I would remain comparatively flexible and incapable of any foolish or violent action against my captors. This was how he explained the purpose of such drugs, but even at that time I had my doubts. I did not believe he told the whole truth.

But in any case, that was all there was of revelations at that time, for on his next visit Semple restricted himself to my instruction in matters concerning the Deep Ones.

This time his subject was the pantheon of their religion, a fascinating rigmarole of myths as fanciful as anything in classical mythology. The basic

theme was simply a repetition of what Sarah had already told me, but Semple's version was so detailed as to preclude any possible suggestion of fakery. The thing had not been created for my benefit, but was obviously a cult of worship ancient as the hills. That is not to say that I was converted to the Cthulhu Mythos—on the contrary, I was not … not then—but while I myself did not believe, it was plain to me that my instructor did.

It is not my purpose to reproduce all of the details here; I could probably fill an entire book with such information as was made available to me, and time simply will not allow for that. Instead, I shall simply present an abbreviated version of most of what I was told, all of which and more, according to Semple, might be discovered in books written by men of the surface world. They were not books which could readily be found in common public libraries, however, but usually in private collections (such as Semple's own) or locked away in the more restricted archives of such institutions as the British Museum, the Widener Library, the Moscow State Hall of Antiquities, and the Bibliotheque Nationale.

Among many unlikely titles were several that stuck in my mind with an unshakeable persistence, and it later dawned on me that indeed I had seen one or two of them in Semple's room. I mean such volumes as the *Liber Ivonis*, and Le Fe's *Dwellers in the Depths*; but there were also many others with titles which were equally fascinating, such as Ludwig Prinn's *De Vermis Mysteriis*, the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* of Von Junzt, and the Comte d'Erlette's *Cultes des Goule*s. These books and others like them held the keys to the pantheon of the Great Old Ones myth cycle—that is, to the lists of gods attaching to it—or at least as much of the subject as had ever been known to land-dwelling man. They named Yog-Sothoth, "the all-in-one and one-in-all", a Supreme Being high in the ranks of the pantheon who was coexistent with all time and conterminous in all space; and Ithaqua the Wind-Walker, a marvellous creature of air and space with the power to walk on the winds that blow forever between the worlds; and Shudde-M'ell, Lord of the Cthonians or Earth-deities, who dwells in the very bowels of the Earth, and many others of equally fantastic attributes.

And here I discovered at least one peculiar parallel with Man's own mythologies; for among lesser gods there was one Dagon, who must surely be that same Dagon or Oannes of the Phoenicians and Philistines, shown on ancient coins and carvings as being half man, half fish! When I mentioned this to Semple he seemed to lose patience with me, saying:

“Haven't you heard a single word I’ve said, John Vollister? Who do you think taught the early Phoenicians the art of extracting purple dye from the murex shell? The Deep Ones, of course! Yes, certainly they are one and the same, Dagon and Oannes: the Dagon of the Deep Ones and the Oannes of the Phoenicians. Why, it was their connection with the Mediterranean Deep Ones that brought about the rise of the Phoenicians in the first place, and it was the destruction of their temples to Dagon and the defection of his worshippers from the faith that brought them down.”

Along with Dagon (who was to the Deep Ones “the Power, the Guide”), there was Hydra, apparently a female, Dagon’s mate or wife, and a great list of lesser gods and elementals of one sort or another, including the Hounds of Tindalos, Nyogtha, Cthugha, Bugg-Shash, Yibb-Tstll, and Zhar, all of them holding places of significance and power in the overall myth cycle. Their servitors were many, and covered a wide range of mythological creatures as fantastic and more so than our own dragons, unicorns, nymphs, and satyrs. Indeed, they had their own Great Satyr, Shub-Niggurath, “the Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young”, to whom I could only liken the better known Pan of more popular legends.

Much was made of certain of these beings in the books, Semple told me, though rarely with any degree of accuracy, truth, or sympathy, for the authors of such works had almost universally chosen to set themselves against the principals of the mythos. Such misinterpretations were invariably the fault of bigoted, misguided, and self-centred Man, who never could see much past the end of his own nose; and since most of the books were several centuries old, this had been even more true at the time of their writing. Why, in those dark centuries of witch-hunts and trials, where every ancient crone or pseudo-chemist was seen to be a witch or diabolist of one sort or another, it must surely be a foregone conclusion that the Cthulhu Cycle and its devotees—however little or much had actually been known about them—would be written off as demons or the agents of “dark forces”.

In point of fact, however, the truth was entirely the opposite, for with very few exceptions—chief among them Hastur, Cthulhu’s half-brother, prisoned in the Lake of Hali in Carcosa—the deities of the mythology were benign beings who looked with kindly eyes upon the works of those who worshipped them. When the stars were right and Great Cthulhu rose up again from the waves and came forth from his R'lyehan sepulchre, then would his followers reap the benefits of his almighty glory! As for those

who opposed, scorned, or denied him … it were better for them had they never existed.

In so many words Semple contradicted himself, with offers of glorious fulfilment on the one hand and threats of monstrous dooms on the other. I made no attempt to query the ambiguity, but let him get on with it.

The real villains of the mythology (he continued) were the so—called "Elder Gods", whose place was in Orion. In a vastly remote epoch, the Great Old Ones had rebelled against the tyranny and oppressive laws of the Elder Gods and had fled down the spaces between the stars to the Solar System. The Elder Gods gave chase and, when they caught up with the interstellar rebels, imprisoned them wherever they found them. Cthulhu they bound with spells in his house in R'lyeh and sank it down into the Pacific; Ithaqua the Wind-Walker was prisoned on a world called Borea in a strange parallel dimension (from which he later broke free, only to find that the Elder Gods had robbed him of his previous freedom and that he was now condemned to wander for ever in the bitterly cold and frozen places of the universe); Yog-Sothoth and Yibb-Tstll were banished to chaotic continua beyond any knowable design of nature, and so forth.

But as slowly and surely as the stars wheel in the heavens and the aeons creep by, so Cthulhu's devotees—not only Deep Ones but, amongst certain backward peoples, human cults and covens also—were ever at work, patiently and persistently bent upon releasing their master from his immemorial prison, for the Deep Ones believed that Cthulhu was not dead but merely sleeping, and that in his long sleep the Great Old One sent out telepathic dreams from R'lyeh to guide his worshippers and show them the way to effect his release. Abdul Alhazred had known this when he wrote his enigmatic couplet:

That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons even death may die.

This, then, was the prime purpose of the Deep Ones: to spread the word of their god—however slowly, stealthily—and eventually to raise him up again to a glorious resurrection, so that he might once more rule the Earth as he had in aeons past before the evil Elder Gods had thrown him down.

In toto, the Cthulhu Mythology was an utterly fascinating thing, and despite my captivity and periods of enforced study it intrigued me

enormously. Semple seemed pleased on the one hand when I told him of my interest, but on the other disappointed that I could not bring myself to accept the mythos as anything other than purely mythical.

"And yet you now accept everything else," he said at the end of this latest session. "You accept the Deep Ones, their submarine cities, even the shoggoths. Why not the Great Old Ones? It was our hope that you would find it possible to embrace the cult of Cthulhu without further persuasion."

"Persuasion?" I looked at him sharply. "I don't know what you mean. Of course I accept the Deep Ones—yes, and shoggoths, too—for after all I've seen living examples of both. But Cthulhu? Why is it so necessary that I 'embrace' your god to become your ambassador? I assume that what Sarah told me was true: that ultimately I am to be an ambassador of sorts, between the Deep Ones and my own people?"

"Your own people?" For a moment he looked startled, then quickly composed himself. "Ah, yes, she told you that, didn't she …?"

"Well?"

"It should not be long now, John Vollister, before you begin to understand your future functions more clearly. To say any more now would be superfluous. In any case, it will all become clear without explanation. You'll see."

"But surely," I began to protest, "you can tell me more than—"

"Not now, John," he stopped me. "Another week, and then we shall begin to see what we shall see." And with that he quickly left.

I did not see Semple again for at least a week, but it was a week full of changes. For one thing, I was rapidly regaining my strength, mainly due to the fact that for the past five or six days I had not been taking the pills Semple gave me when each of his visits was at an end. I would place them under my tongue and pretend to wash them down with water, then get rid of them as soon as I was left alone.

I suspected that my food was drugged, too, but however distasteful that half—raw mulch of fish invariably was, still I could not go without sustenance. And, truth to tell, despite the fact that the food was raw, I was eating ravenously. This was wholly due (I told myself) to the fact that I was now being given less and less as the days went by, almost as if my captors were intent upon starving me.

Also, I was seeing much less of Sarah now, and when she did visit me there was something different in the way she looked at me. I would find her

holding my hands and examining them minutely, or staring at my face as if seeking something in my eyes, something hidden there which she expected to find if only she looked deeply enough. Too, she would pretend to kiss me, but as she did so I would feel her fingers gently massaging the sides of my neck. It was as if she knew that I had developed a nagging sore throat and that the swollen glands of my boyhood had returned to trouble me again.

Then, on the ninth day, after Sargent had been in with fresh blankets and clean sheets (my linen had to be changed regularly due to the damp atmosphere of the tank), he returned with—of all things—a bucket of young, live mackerel! These he released into the water in the sunken area of the tank, telling me that they would live for two days … after which they would be no good for eating. And from then on there was no more food.

I slept, started awake from my now recurrent nightmare of pursuit through submarine caves of coral, nervously paced the confines of the tank for hours on end without receiving a single visitor, then kneeled to peer into the shallow water of the sunken area. The mackerel were there, their movement sluggish now, and my hunger was increasing with each passing moment.

Later I slept again—and awoke wondering what would be the difference between the taste and texture of fish fresh from the water and the uncooked food which until recently I had been receiving. One thing was certain: I must not starve myself, for then I would never be able to find the strength necessary to effect my escape.

My escape, yes, for that one thought was now uppermost in my mind: to get out of here and bring the existence of these creatures—of the Deep Ones—to the attention of the authorities. It could well be that eventually a time would come when Man and Deep One might meet on terms of mutual trust, friendship, and benefit, but not while groups such as this were capable of crimes against the person such as I had suffered. The sooner I got out of here the better, but to achieve that end I would have to be strong enough to tackle at least one of my captors. Which led me to the question: which one?

I couldn't picture Sarah or the doctor coming to see me without having someone close at hand to call upon if needs be; which left only Sargent or Semple. The former, while seeming somewhat retarded and slow, had impressed me as capable of great strength. But Semple was slim and small-framed; it would have to be him. As for when I would make my attempt …

It might be one more day or ten before my chance came, and meanwhile … meanwhile I was hungry.

I hardly intend to go into the details of the meal I then made, when I had to strip off my clothes and go into the water after the mackerel. But I did eat, and after the first tentative taste, the first bite, I felt no further nausea but attacked the food with relish. For all said and done, that is all it was: food, sustenance; and my stomach welcomed it without the slightest qualm. Obviously, I was a harder man than I had previously suspected.

By the time I was done with eating, I was dry, and as I put on my clothes I found myself wondering why I had not felt the cold. It must surely be cold in the tank; indeed, I remembered feeling cold during my first few days of consciousness. And yet, while my throat was still very sore and my neck glands bothered me continuously, I now felt quite warm and comfortable. I was given no more time to think the matter out, however, for as I finished dressing there came the clatter of approaching feet and the sounds of a struggle growing louder outside my door.

The scuffling and kicking sounds, accompanied by grunts and thuds, moved past the tank and I heard the banging of a metal door being thrown open. Then, coming to me clearly, I heard the harsh sounds of voices raised in anger—and another voice almost shrill with fear. There were several heavy thumps against the wall of the tank, followed by a cry of pain, and finally I heard the metal door slammed shut and barred. Then, along with a string of low curses uttered in vicious and guttural tones, there came again the sound of feet, retreating this time, and at length silence.

It was only then that I thought to hammer on my own door and demand to know what was going on, which I would have done had not sounds of low moaning coming from close at hand checked me. I put my ear to the metal wall and listened. Yes, on the other side of that steel panel someone was hurt and groaning in his pain. A second prisoner? But whoever he was, how could I possibly help him?

In sudden desperation I cast about with my eyes until they lighted upon a small recessed ventilation grille which was fitted in the wall at a height of about eight feet. I had noticed it before, but had given it no great consideration. Only nine inches square, even if I had managed to remove the grille my case would not be improved any. Now, though, if I stood on my chair, I should at least be able to see into the adjacent tank.

I pulled the chair over to the wall and climbed up on to it, stretching myself to peer through the metal lattice of the grille. There on the narrow ledge of the recess, on my side of the grille, lay a small screwdriver, a little rusty but still serviceable. It must have been left there by a workman when the tanks were built. Making a mental note of this potential weapon, I looked beyond it through the grille and into the tank on the other side. This second tank, too, had a light which had been left on. I could see that the place was a duplicate of my own cell and that it appeared to be empty—

—Or was it? If I raised myself a few inches higher I should be able to look down through a fairly steep angle and … *yes!*

There on the floor, spread wide apart, I could see the lower half of a pair of trousers with projecting feet, one of which had lost its shoe. The feet moved jerkily even as I watched. A moment more and there came another groan as the feet tensed for a second or two before falling slack. The groaning stopped abruptly. Whoever he was, my colleague in the adjacent tank had passed out.

Either that, or he was dead …

For what must have been all of two hours I sat on my bed, my ear to the metal wall behind which lay the sleeping or dead stranger. Every so often I would climb on to my chair and peer through the grille, and at last I thought to take up the rusty screwdriver and begin working on the four screws which held the grille in place.

I managed to loosen three of the screws (no mean feat with a blade which was far too small for the task), but the fourth and last screw would not move. I felt like hammering at the stubborn screw with the hard plastic body of the screwdriver, but feared that the noise would bring someone to investigate. In the end I gave it up, placed the tool back on its ledge, got down, and dropped the three successfully removed screws into the water in the sunken area of the tank.

As I was doing this I noticed that the remaining three or four fish barely were moving, all of them on or close to the surface. I was poising my hand over the water, preparing to pluck out a fish as it swam slowly by, when there came a low, painful cough followed by a recurrence of the groaning. Immediately I stood up, climbed on to my chair, and peered through the grille.

I was in time to see the pair of feet withdrawn, to hear more groans and an uncertain fumbling at the metal wall, and then at last the stranger staggered into view with one hand held up to the side of his head. He was of medium build, blond with short-cropped hair, in his early forties at a guess. He moved over to the door, turned to scan the interior of the tank with pain-slitted eyes, then returned his attention to the door and lifted a fist as if to bang upon its metal oval.

"Don't!" I called out, keeping my voice low. "You'll only bring them back down on us."

"Wha—?" he started, spinning about to scan the interior of the tank once more. His face was bruised and bloodied, and as I tapped quietly on the grille with the screwdriver, so it seemed that his eyes met mine where I peered at him.

"Who—?" he began again, moving to stand uncertainly beneath the grille and squinting up at me. Perhaps he could make out the outline of my face, or at least my eyes through the bars of the grille. I studied his face for a moment, then breathed more easily at the discovery that it showed none of the now-familiar stigmata.

"I'm a prisoner, like yourself," I told him. "A prisoner of these … these madmen!"

"Madmen?" he laughed low and bitterly, then groaned and held his head, staggering slightly. "Possibly they are mad. I don't know. But men?" He slowly shook his head.

"What do you know of them?" I eagerly asked as he sat down carefully on the metal floor, lowering his head to hold it in his hands. "Why have they brought you here?"

He looked up again, sharply, and I thought I saw suspicion in his eyes. "Who are you?" he asked. "One of them, trying to find out just how much I know?"

"Vollister," I told him. "My name is John Vollister, and I assure you I am not—"

"John Vollister?" he cut in. "The marine biologist? Yes, that would be right enough. I remember reading somewhere that you lived out this way."

"Yes," I answered, "that's me, but I don't work a great deal these days. I live a few miles down the coast—or at least I did until I walked into this. But who are you that you know my name?"

“Oh, I know your name, all right. I’ve read your stuff—all of it. I’ve been reading everything I can find on the sea and its creatures for years now. My name’s Belton—Jeremy Belton.”

In my turn I recognized his name immediately. “Belton the journalist? Wasn’t there something about you in the news quite recently? Something about ‘sensational revelations’ or some such? A ‘cosmic threat’ of some sort or other? I don’t pay too much attention to the dailies. But what’s brought you to this?”

“What brings me here?” Again he laughed his bitter laugh. “Well, Mr. Vollister, if I may borrow a phrase from you, I also ‘walked into it’. As neat a trap as ever was laid.”

“A trap?”

He nodded. “I was contacted by ‘a friend’ who told me he had definite proof of the existence of Deep Ones right here in England. A meeting was arranged at a quiet pub in London. There were drinks—which must have been drugged—and …”

“And they brought you here.”

Again he nodded. “I woke up in a moving car and managed to catch sight of a signpost in Newquay. That told me where I was. And I feigned unconsciousness while they were carrying me down here from the car. So I’m at a place on the beach somewhere in Cornwall, right? I tried to make a run for it as they were bringing me into the building, but—” he shrugged, then thumped the metal floor with his clenched fist. “What a damned fool I am!”

“Shh!” I cautioned him, then asked: “But why have they done this to you?”

“Those ‘sensational revelations’ you mentioned. You know what it was all about? No, of course you don't. No one knows, for I’ve kept it close to my chest for the last five years.”

“I think I do know,” I answered. “You were going to reveal them to the world—the Deep Ones, I mean.”

His eyes widened momentarily in surprise. “You're catching on,” he said. “Yes, I had been promised a spot on television, a little space in the newspapers … if my story was hot enough. You see, I still have a lot of contacts from my days as a newshound. If I said I had something big, then they knew it was pretty big! But our friends got wind of it, and—”

“And here you are.”

He nodded yet again. “The story was due to break in a week’s time. But not now. Now I’m here—of all places.”

“Of all places? How do you mean?”

“Cornwall,” he answered. “Mermaid country. Didn’t you know that? Why, there are still people in these parts who claim they have mermaid ancestors. And, by God, they’re probably right!”

“You really do know a lot about them, then?”

“The Deep Ones?” he squinted up at me. “Do I know about them? I’ve devoted myself to tracking them down, finding out as much as it’s humanly possible to know about them, everything. My one mistake lies in doing it on my own, I’ve kept it all to myself, told no one—but my trail must have looked a mile wide to the Deep Ones. I might have known they wouldn’t let me get away with it.”

“But what will they do with you? They can’t hold you here indefinitely. They’ve told me that they mean people no harm, that I myself am to be their ambassador, and that—”

“No harm!” he exclaimed, cutting me off. Then his voice became scornful. “And you believe that! ‘Ambassador’, you say? The first mankind will know of it is when they’re crawling all over us!”

And suddenly I knew he was right, and that I was a bigger fool than I had previously been willing to admit. “I’ve had my suspicions,” I answered. “But if they’ve been lying to me … then what do they want with me?”

He shook his head and shivered. “With you? I can’t say. But I know what they want with me.” Behind the streaks of dried blood his face was pale. “I doubt if I’ll ever see the outside of this place.”

“Murder?” I said. “You believe they’d go that far?”

Now he laughed, weary hysteria in his voice. “Oh, you don’t know them at all, do you, John? They’ll go just as far as they need to. All of them—in all their many forms—they’re bent on one thing and one thing only. One goal, and once they’ve achieved that, the next step will be the destruction of mankind, of the universe itself!”

There were so many questions I wanted to put to Belton, but I could only ask them one at a time. “Their many forms?” I repeated him. “What do you mean?”

“Well, there are those that remain land-bound, who never fully take on the true form of the aquatic Deep Ones. They’re sort of half-and-half. Then there are those that are born on dry land and go to the sea later. These are

the real amphibians. Yes, and I guess there are other types. I've had a personal and very real experience with at least one more …" He paused.

I said nothing for a moment, but thought back on what Semple had told me about blind Deep Ones in subterranean lakes. Finally, I asked: "What is this other type you mention?"

"It's a long story," he answered. "But since it looks like you're destined to be my one and only audience …" He shrugged. "It started with Haggopian."

"Haggopian?" I repeated, frowning. "Haggopian! But he's dead, or at least disappeared, five, six years ago. If ever a man was my idol, Richard Haggopian was that man. Wasn't there something odd about the way he vanished?"

"Something odd?" Again he uttered his hysterical laugh, finding great difficulty, I thought, in controlling it. "Listen, I was with him at the end."

"When he died?"

"Yes … no," he said. He shivered again and hugged his coat closer. "I was with him," he repeated, his eyes searching the grille almost pleadingly. "Listen, and I'll tell you about Haggopian."

VI: Haggopian

"I'll never forget it," Belton began. "Richard Haggopian, perhaps the world's greatest authority in ichthyology and oceanography, to say nothing of all the many allied sciences and subjects, had at last agreed to an interview. I was jubilant. At least a dozen journalists before me, from as many parts of the world, had made the futile journey to Kletnos in the Aegean to seek out Haggopian the Armenian, but only my application had been accepted.

"It's not hard to say why Haggopian excited such interest among the world's foremost journalists. Any man with his scientific and literary talents, with a beautiful young wife, an island in the sun, and—perhaps most important of all—a blatantly negative attitude towards even the most beneficial publicity would certainly have attracted the same interest. And, of course, he was a millionaire.

"For eight frustrating days I had waited on the Armenian's return to Haggopiana—his tiny island hideaway two miles east of Kletnos and midway between Athens and Iraklion—and just when it seemed that my

strictly limited funds must surely run out, then Haggopian's great silver hydrofoil, the *Echinoidea*, cut a white scar on the incredible blue to the south-west as it sped in to a mid-morning mooring.

"With binoculars from the flat white roof of my Kletnos hotel?—I watched the hydrofoil circle the island until it disappeared behind Haggopiana's wedge of white rock. Two hours later the Armenian's man came across in a sleek motorboat to bring me news of my appointment. I was to attend Haggopian at three in the afternoon. A boat would be sent for me.

"At three I was ready, dressed in sandals, cool grey slacks, and a white T-shirt—civilized attire for a sunny afternoon in the Aegean—waiting for the motorboat when it returned to the natural rock wharf. On the way out to Haggopiana, as I gazed over the prow of the craft down through the crystal-clear water at the gliding, shadowy groupers and the clusters of black sea urchins, I did a mental check-up on what I knew of the elusive owner of the island ahead.

"Richard Hemeral Angelos Haggopian, born in 1919 of an illicit union between his penniless but beautiful half-breed Polynesian mother and millionaire Armenian-Cypriot father; author of three of the most fascinating books I had ever read, books for the layman, telling of the world's seas and all their multiform denizens in simple, uncomplicated language; discoverer of the Taumotu Trench, a previously unsuspected hole in the bed of the South Pacific almost seven thousand fathoms deep; benefactor of the world's greatest aquariums and museums, etc., etc., etc.

"Haggopian the much married—three times, in fact, and all since the age of thirty—an unfortunate man, apparently, where brides were concerned. His first wife (British) died at sea after nine years of wedded life, mysteriously disappearing overboard from her husband's yacht in calm seas on the shark-ridden Barrier Reef in 1958; number two (Greek-Cypriot) died in 1964 of some exotic wasting disease and was buried at sea; and number three—one Cleanthes Leonides, an Athenian model of note, wed on her eighteenth birthday—had apparently turned recluse, since she had not been seen publicly for more than two years.

"Cleanthes Haggopian—yes! Expecting to meet her I had checked through dozens of old fashion magazines for her photographs. That had been a few days ago in Athens, and now I recalled her face as I had seen it in those pictures: young, natural, and beautiful in the Classic Greek

tradition. And again, despite rumours that she was no longer living with her husband, I found myself anticipating our meeting.

"In no time at all the flat white rock of the island loomed to some thirty feet out of the sea and my navigator swung his fast craft over to starboard, passing between two jagged points of salt-encrusted rock standing twenty yards or so out from Haggopiana's most northerly tip. As we rounded the point I saw that the easterly face of the island was formed of a white sand beach, with a pier at which the *Echinoidea* was moored. Set back from the beach in a cluster of pomegranate, almond, locust, and olive trees there sat an immense and sprawling flat-roofed bungalow.

"At the dry end of the pier my quarry waited until, with the very gentlest of bumps, the motorboat pulled in to mooring. He wore grey flannels and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled down. A wide, silken, scarlet cummerbund was bound about his waist. His thin nose supported heavy, opaquely-lensed sunglasses. So this was the great man—tall, awkward-seeming, bald, extremely intelligent, and very, very rich—his hand outstretched in greeting.

"He was something of a shock. I had seen photographs of him, quite a few, and had often wondered at the odd sheen such pictures had given his features. I had always taken the quality of the shots as being simply the result of poor photography. His rare appearances in public had always been very short ones and unannounced, so that by the time cameras were clicking or whirring he was usually making an exit.

"Now I could see that I had short-changed the photographers. He did have a sheen to his skin, and there must also have been something wrong with his eyes. Small tears glistened on his cheeks, rolling thinly down from behind the dark lenses. In his left hand he carried a square of silk with which, every now and then, he would dab at this telltale dampness.

"'How do you do, Mr. Belton?" His voice was a thick, heavily accented rasp, conflicting with his polite enquiry and manner of expression. 'I am sorry you have had to wait so long, but I am afraid I could not delay my work …'

"'Not at all, sir. I'm sure this meeting will amply repay my patience.'

"His handshake was unpleasant, and I unobtrusively wiped my hand on my T-shirt. Patently, that sheen to the man's skin was the result of sun oil. His hand had seemed greasy. An allergy, perhaps, which might also explain the dark-tinted glasses.

“I had noticed from the boat a complex of pipes and valves between the sea and the house, and now, approaching that sprawling yellow building in Haggopian’s wake, I could hear the muffled throb of pumps and the gush of water. Once inside the place it soon became apparent just what the sounds meant: the building was nothing less than a gigantic aquarium.

“Massive glass tanks lined the walls, so that the sunlight filtering through from exterior porthole-like windows entered the rooms in greenish shades that dappled the marble floors and gave the place an eerie, submarine aspect. There were no printed cards or boards to describe the finny dwellers in the huge tanks, and as he led me from room to room it became clear why such labels were unnecessary. Haggopian knew each specimen intimately, his rasping voice making a running commentary as we visited in turn the bungalow’s many wings.

“‘An unusual coelenterate, this one, from five hundred fathoms. Difficult to keep alive—pressure and so forth. I call it *Physalia haggopia*—quite deadly. Makes a water-baby of the Portuguese man-of-war.’ (this of a great purplish mass with trailing, wispy-green tentacles undulating horribly through the water of a tank of huge proportions).

“Haggopian, as he spoke, deftly plucked a small fish from an open tank on a nearby table, throwing it up over the lip of the greater tank to his ‘unusual coelenterate’. In a frenzy, the fish swam straight into one of the green wisps—and instantly stiffened. A few seconds more, and the hideous jellyfish had commenced a languid ingestion.

“‘Given time,’ Haggopian grated, ‘it would do the same to you.’

“In the largest room of all, I paused, literally astonished at the size of the tanks. Here, where sharks swam through brain and other coral formations, the glass of these miniature oceans must have been very thick. Backdrops had been arranged to give the impression of vastly sprawling submarine vistas.

“In one tank ugly-looking hammer-heads of over two metres in length were cruising slowly from side to side. Metal steps climbed up to and over this tank’s rim, then down the other side and into the water itself. Haggopian explained: ‘This is where I used to feed my lampreys—they had to be handled carefully. I no longer have them; I returned the last of them to the sea three years ago.’

“Three years? I peered closer as one of the hammerheads slid his belly along the glass. On the white and silver underside of the fish, between the

gill slits and down the belly, numerous patches of raw red showed, many of them forming clearly defined circles where the close-packed scales had been recently removed and the sucker-like mouths of lampreys had been at work. Obviously a slip of the tongue—three days, more like.

“I stopped pondering my host’s mistake as we passed into another room whose specimens must surely have delighted any conchologist. Again tanks lined the walls, smaller than the others I had so far seen but marvellously laid out to duplicate perfectly the natural environs of their inhabitants. And these were the living gems of every ocean on Earth. Great conches and clams from the South Pacific; tiny, beautifully marked cowries from the Great Barrier Reef; hundreds of weird uni- and bi-valves of every shape and size. Even the windows were of shell—great, translucent, pinkly glowing fan shells, porcelain thin but immensely strong, from very deep waters—suffusing the room in blood tints different again from the submarine dappling of the previous rooms.

“My tour was interrupted here when Costas, the Greek who had brought me from Kletnos, entered this fascinating room to murmur something of obvious importance to his employer. Haggopian nodded his head in agreement, and Costas left, returning a few moments later with half a dozen other Greeks, each of whom had a few words with Haggopian before departing. Eventually we were alone again.

“‘They were my men,” he told me, "some of them for almost twenty years, but now I have no further need of them. I have paid them their last wages; they have said their farewells; now they are going away. Costas will take them to Kletnos and return later for you. By then I should have finished my story.’

“‘I don’t quite follow you, Mr Haggopian. You mean you’re going into seclusion here? What you said just then sounded ominously final.’

“‘Seclusion?’ Here? No, Mr. Belton—but final, yes! I have learned as much of the sea as I can from here; my education is almost complete.’

“He saw the puzzled look on my face and smiled wryly. ‘You are at pains to understand, which is hardly surprising. Few men, if any, have known my circumstances before, of that I am certain. That is why I have chosen to speak now. You caught me at the right time, for I would never have taken it upon myself to tell my story had I not been so persistently pursued. Perhaps the telling will serve as a warning. It gives me pause, the

number of students devoted to the lore of the sea who would emulate my works and discoveries.' He frowned, pausing for a moment.

"'Tomorrow when the island is deserted, Costas will return and set all of the living specimens loose. Even the largest fishes will be returned to the sea. Then Haggopiana will truly be empty.'

"'But to what end?' I asked. 'And where do you intend to go? Surely this island is your base, your home and stronghold. It was here you wrote your wonderful books, and—'

"'My base and stronghold, yes,' he harshly cut me off. 'The island has been these things to me—but my home? No longer. When your interview is over I shall walk to the top of the rocks and look once more across the water to Kletnos. Then I will take my *Echinoidea* and guide her out through to Kasos Straits on a deliberate course until her fuel runs out. There can be no turning back. There is a place unsuspected in the Mediterranean, where the sea is so deep and cool, and where—'

"He broke off and turned his glistening face to me. 'But there, at this rate the tale will never be told. Suffice to say that the last trip of the *Echinoidca* will be to the bottom—and that I shall be with her.'

"'Suicide?' I gasped. 'You intend to—drown yourself?'

"At that he laughed, a rasping cough of a laugh that jarred like chalk on a blackboard. 'Drown myself? Is a watery grave so distasteful, then?' He laughed again.

"For a few moments I stared at him in dumb amazement and concern, uncertain as to whether I stood in the presence of a sane man or …

"He gazed at me intently through the dark lenses of his glasses, and under the scrutiny of those unseen eyes I slowly shook my head, backing off a step.

"'I'm sorry, Mr Haggopian, I just…'

"'Unpardonable!' he rasped as I struggled for words. 'My behaviour is inexcusable! Come, Mr. Belton. Perhaps we can be more comfortable out here.'

"He led me through a doorway and out on to a patio surrounded by lemon and pomegranate trees. A white garden table with cane chairs stood in the shade. Haggopian clapped his hands sharply, then offered me a chair before seating himself opposite. Again I noticed that the man's movements seemed oddly awkward.

“An old woman, wrapped around Indian-fashion in white silk and with the lower half of her face veiled in a long shawl answered the Armenian’s summons. He spoke a few guttural but gentle words to her in Greek. She went, to return shortly with a tray, two glasses, and (amazingly) an English beer with the chill still on the bottle.

“I saw that Haggopian’s glass was already filled, but with no drink I could readily recognize. The liquid was greenly cloudy with sediment, yet the Armenian did not seem to notice. He touched glasses with me before drinking deeply. I, too, took a deep draft, for I was very dry; but as I placed my glass back on the table I saw that Haggopian was still drinking. He completely drained off the murky liquid, put down his glass, and again clapped his hands in summons.

“At this point I found myself wondering why the man did not remove his sunglasses. We were, after all, in the shade. A glance at the Armenian's face served to remind me that he must suffer from some allergy, for again I saw those thin trickles of liquid flowing down from behind the enigmatic lenses.

“The silence was broken when the old woman came back with a further glass of her master’s drink. He spoke a few more words to her before she once more left us. I could not help but notice, though, as she bent over the table, how very dehydrated her face looked, with pinched nostrils, deeply wrinkled skin, and dull eyes sunk deep beneath the bony ridges of her eyebrows. An island peasant woman, obviously. She seemed to find a peculiar magnetism in Haggopian, leaning towards him noticeably, visibly fighting to control an apparent desire to *touch* him whenever she came near him.

“‘She will leave with you when you go. Costas will take care of her.’

“‘Was I staring?’ I started guiltily, aware suddenly of an odd feeling of unreality and discontinuity. ‘I’m sorry—I didn’t intend to be rude.’

“‘No matter. What I have to tell you makes nonsense of all matters of sensibility. You strike me as a man not easily … frightened, Mr. Belton?’

“‘I can be surprised, sir—but frightened? Among other things, I've been a war correspondent, and—’

“’Of course, but there are worse things than the horrors of war.’

“‘That may be, but in any case I’m a journalist. I’ll take a chance on being—frightened.’

“‘Good! And please put aside any doubts you may by now have conceived with regard to my sanity.’

“I started to protest, but he quickly cut me off. ‘No, no, Mr. Belton! You would have to be totally insensible not to perceive the strangeness here.’

“He fell silent as for the fourth time the old woman appeared, placing a pitcher on the table before him. This time she almost fawned on him, and he jerked away from her, nearly upsetting his chair. He rasped a few harsh words in Greek, and I heard the strange, shrivelled creature sob as she turned to stumble away.

“‘What on earth is *wrong* with the woman?’

“‘In good time, Mr. Belton.’ He held up his hand. ‘All in good time.’ Again he drained his glass, refilling it from the pitcher before commencing his tale proper.

“‘My first ten years of life were spent in the Cook Islands, and the next five in Cyprus,’ Haggopian began, ‘always within shouting distance of the sea. My father died when I was sixteen, and willed to me two and one half millions of pounds Sterling. When I was twenty-one I came into this money and found that I could now devote myself utterly to the ocean—my one real love in life. By that I mean all oceans, all great waters …

“‘At the end of the war I bought Haggopiana and began to build my collection here. I wrote about my work and was twenty-nine years old when I finished *The Cradle Sea.* It was my success with that book—I used to enjoy success—and with *The Sea: A New Frontier,* which prompted me to commence work upon *Denizens of* the *Deep.*

“‘I had been married to my first wife for five years by the time I had the first rough manuscript of my work ready, and I could have published the book there and then but for the fact that I had become something of a perfectionist both in my writing and in my studies. In short, there were passages in the manuscript—whole chapters on certain species—with which I was not satisfied.

“‘One of these chapters was devoted to the sirenians. The manatee in particular had fascinated me for a long time, in respect of its undeniable connections with the mermaid and siren legends of old renown; from which, of course, the order takes its name. However, it was more than merely this that took me off initially on my Manatee Survey, as I called those voyages, though at that time I could never have guessed at the importance of my quest. As it happened, my enquiries were to lead me to the first real pointer to my future—a frightful hint of my destination, though of course I never recognized it as such.’ He paused.

“‘Destination?’ I felt obliged to fill the silence. ‘Literary or scientific?’

“‘My *ultimate* destination.’

“‘Oh!’

“After a moment, Haggopian continued, and as he spoke I could feel his eyes staring at me intently through the opaque lenses:

“‘You are aware of the theories of continental drift, which have it that the continents are gradually floating apart and that they were once much closer to one another? Such theories are sound. Primal Pangaea did exist, trod by feet other than those of men. Indeed, that first great continent knew life long before the first man wondered at his place in the Universe.

“‘But at any rate, it was partly to further the work of Wegener and the others that I decided upon my Manatee Survey—a comparison of the manatees of Liberia, Senegal, and the Gulf of Guinea with those of the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. You see, Mr. Belton, of all the shores of Earth these two are the only coastal stretches where manatees occur in their natural state: excellent zoological evidence for continental drift.

“‘Well, eventually I found myself in Jacksonville on the East Coast of North America. There, by chance, I heard of certain strange stones taken out of the sea—stones bearing weathered hieroglyphs of fantastic antiquity, presumably washed ashore by the back currents of the Gulf Stream. Such was my interest in these stones and their possible source—you may recall that Mu, Atlantis, and other mythical sunken lands and cities have long been favourite themes of mine—that I quickly concluded my Manatee Survey to sail to Boston, Massachusetts, where I had heard that a collection of such oddities was kept in a private museum. There, when I saw those ancient stones bearing evidence of primal intelligence, I knew that I had conclusive proof of the floating continents theories. Why, I had seen evidence of that same intelligence in places as far apart as the Ivory Coast and the Islands of Polynesia!’

“For some time, Haggopian had been showing an increasing agitation, and now he sat wringing his hands and moving restlessly in his chair. ‘Ah, yes, Mr. Belton, was it not a discovery? For as soon as I saw those basalt fragments I *recognized* them! They were small, those pieces, yes, but the inscriptions upon them were the same as I had seen cut in the great black Pillars of Geph in the coastal jungles of Liberia—pillars long uncovered by the sea and about which, on moonlight nights, the natives cavorted and

chanted ancient liturgies. I had known those liturgies, too, Belton, from my childhood in the Cook Islands—*Ia-R'lyeh! Cthulhu fhtagn!'*

"With this last thoroughly alien gibberish fluting weirdly from his lips, the Armenian had risen suddenly to his feet, his head aggressively forward and his knuckles white where they pressed down on the table. Then, as I quickly leaned backwards away from him, he slowly relaxed and fell back into his chair as though exhausted. He let his hands hang limp and turned his face to one side.

"For at least three minutes, Haggopian sat like this before turning to me with a half-apologetic shrug of his shoulders. 'You—you must excuse me, sir. I find myself very easily given to over—excitement.'

"He took up his glass and drank, then dabbed again at the rivulets of liquid from his eyes before continuing. 'But I digress. Mainly I wished to point out that once, long ago, the Americas and Africa were Siamese .twins, joined at their middle by a lowland strip which sank as the continental drift began. There were cities in those lowlands, and suffice to say that the beings who built the ancient cities, beings who seeped down from the stars over inchoate aeons, once held dominion over all the world. But they left other traces, those beings, queer gods and cults and even stranger … residua.

"'However, quite apart from these vastly interesting geological discoveries, I had something of a *genealogical* interest in New England. My mother was Polynesian, you know, but she also had old New England blood in her. My great-great-grandmother was taken from the islands to New England by a deck hand on one of the old East India sailing ships in the late 1820s, and two generations later my grandmother returned to Polynesia after her American husband died in a fire. Until then the line had lived in Innsmouth, a decaying New England seaport of ill repute, where Polynesian women were anything but rare. My grandmother was pregnant when she returned to the islands, and the American blood came out strongly in my mother.

"'I mention all this because … because I cannot help but wonder if something in my genealogical background has to do with …'

"'You see, I had heard many strange tales in Polynesia as a child—tales of *things* that come up out of the sea to mate with men, and of their terrible progeny!'

“For the second time a feverish excitement made itself apparent in Haggopian’s voice and attitude; and his whole body trembled, seemingly in the grip of massive, barely repressed emotions.

“‘*Ia-R’lyeh!*” he suddenly burst out again in that unknown tongue. ‘What monstrous things lurk even now in the ocean deeps, Belton, and what other things *return* to that cradle of earthly life?’

“Abruptly he stood up to begin pacing the patio in his swaying, clumsy lope, mumbling incoherently to himself and casting occasional glances in my direction where I sat, very disturbed now by his obviously aberrant condition. But at last he sat down again and continued:

“‘Once more I ask you to accept my apologies, Mr. Belton, and I crave your pardon for straying so wildly from the principal facts. I was speaking before of my book, *Denizens of the Deep*, and of my dissatisfaction with certain chapters.

“‘Well, when finally my interest in New England’s shores and mysteries waned, I returned to that book and especially to a chapter concerning ocean parasites. Of course I was limited by the fact that the sea cannot boast so large a number of parasitic or symbiotic creatures as the land; none the less I dealt of the hagfish and lamprey, of certain species of fish-leech, whale lice, and clinging weeds, and I compared them with fresh-water leeches, types of tapeworm, fungi, and so on. Now, you might be tempted to believe that there is too great a difference between sea- and land-dwellers, and of course in a way there is—but when one considers that all life as we know it sprang originally from the sea …?’

“‘But to continue:

“‘In 1956 I was exploring the oceans of the Solomon Islands in a yacht with a crew of seven. We had moored for the night on a beautiful uninhabited little island off San Cristobal, and the next morning, as my men were decamping and preparing the yacht for sea, I walked along the beach looking for conches.

“‘Stranded in a pool by the tide I saw a great shark, its rough back and dorsal actually breaking the surface. I felt sorry for the creature, and even more so when I saw fastened to its belly one of those very bloodsuckers with which I was still concerned. Not only that, but the hagfish was a beauty! Four feet long if it was an inch, and definitely of a type I had never before seen. By that time, *Denizens of the Deep* was almost ready, and but

for that chapter I have already mentioned the book would have been at the printers long since.

"'Well, I could not waste the time it would take to tow the shark to deeper waters, so I had one of my men put it out of its misery with a rifle. Goodness only knows how long the parasite had fed on its juices, gradually weakening it until it had become merely a toy of the tides. As for the hagfish: he was to come with us. Aboard my yacht I had plenty of tanks to take bigger fish than him, and of course I wanted to study him and include a mention of him in my book.

"'My men managed to net the strange fish without too much trouble and took it aboard, but they seemed to be having some difficulty getting it back out of the net and into a sunken tank. I went over to give a hand before the fish expired, and that was when the creature began thrashing about. It came out of the net with one great flexing of its body—and took me with it into the tank!

"'My men laughed at first, naturally, and I would have laughed with them—*had that awful fish not in an instant fastened itself on my body, its suction-pad mouth grinding high up on my chest and its eyes boring horribly into mine!'*

"After a short pause, during which Haggopian's face worked hideously, he continued:

"'I was delirious for three weeks after they dragged me out of the tank. Shock?—Poison? I did not know at the time. *Now* I know, but it is too late. Possibly it was too late even then.

"'My wife was with us as cook, and during my delirium, as I feverishly tossed and turned in my cabin bed, she tended me. Meanwhile, the crew kept the hagfish—a previously unknown species of Myxinoidea—well supplied with small sharks and other fish. They never allowed the cyclostome to drain its hosts completely, you understand, but they knew enough to keep the creature healthy for me.

"'My recovery, I remember, was plagued by recurrent dreams of monolithic submare cities. Cyclopean structures of basaltic stone people by strange hybrid beings: the amphibious Deep Ones, minions of Dagon and worshippers of dreaming Cthulhu. In these dreams eerie voices called out to me and whispered things of my forebears—things which made me moan through my fever at the hearing …

“‘After I recovered the times were many when I would go below decks to study the hagfish through the glass sides of its tank. Have you ever seen a hagfish close up, Mr. Belton? No? Consider yourself lucky. They are ugly, with looks to match their natures, eel-like and primitive. And their mouths —their horrible, rasp-like, sucking mouths …!

“‘Two months later, towards the end of the voyage, the horror really began. By then my wounds, the raw places on my chest where the thing had had me, were healed completely: but the memory of that first encounter was still terribly fresh in my mind, and—’

“‘I see the question written on your face, Mr. Belton, but indeed you heard me correctly—I did say my *first* encounter. Oh, yes—there were more encounters to come.”

“At this point in his remarkable narrative, Haggopian paused once more to dab at the rivulets of moisture seeping from behind his sunglasses and to drink yet again from the cloudy liquid in his glass. It gave me a chance covertly to look about me. The Armenian was seated with his back to the great bungalow, and as I glanced nervously in that direction I saw a face move quickly out of sight in one of the smaller porthole windows. Later, as Haggopian’s story progressed, I was able to see that the face in the window belonged to the old servant woman and that her eyes were fixed firmly upon him in a kind of hungry fascination. Whenever she caught me looking at her, she would withdraw.

“‘No,’ Haggopian finally went on, ‘the hagfish was far from finished with me. As the weeks went by, my interest in the creature grew into a sort of obsession, so that every spare moment found me staring into its tank or examining the curious marks and scars it left on the bodies of its unwilling hosts. And so it was that I discovered how those hosts were *not* unwilling. A peculiar fact, and yet—

“‘Yes, I found that having once played host to the cyclostome, the fishes it fed upon were ever eager to resume such *liaisons,* even unto death! Later I was able to establish quite definitely that following the initial violation the hosts of the hagfish submitted to subsequent attacks with a kind of soporific pleasure. Apparently, Mr. Belton, I had found in the sea the perfect parallel of the vampire of land-based legend. Just what this meant, the utter *horror* of my discovery, did not dawn on me until… until…

“‘We were moored off Limassol prior to starting on the very last leg of our trip, the voyage back to Haggopiana. I had allowed the crew—all but

one man, Costas, who had no desire to leave the yacht—ashore for a night out. My wife, too, had gone to visit friends in Famagusta. Myself: I was happy enough to stay aboard. I had known a tired feeling, a lethargy, for a number of days.

"'I went to bed early. From my cabin I could see the lights of the town and hear the gentle lap of water about the legs of the pier at which we were moored. Costas was drowsing aft with a fishing line dangling in the water. Before I dropped off to sleep I called out to him. He answered in a sleepy sort of way, saying that there was hardly a ripple on the sea and that already he had pulled in three fine mullets …

"'When I regained consciousness it was three weeks later and I was back here on Haggopiana. The hagfish had had me yet again. They told me how Costas had heard the splash and found me in the cyclostome's tank. He had managed to get me out of the water before I drowned, but had needed to fight like the very devil to get the monster off me—or, rather, *to get me off the monster!*

"'Do the implications begin to show, Mr. Belton?

"'You see this?' He unbuttoned his shirt to show me the marks on his chest—circular scars of about three inches in diameter, like those I had seen on the hammerhead—and I stiffened in my chair as I saw their great number. Down to the silken cummerbund he unbuttoned his shirt, and barely an inch of his skin remained unblemished. A number of the scars even overlapped.

"'Good God!' I finally managed to gasp.

"'Which god?' Haggopian instantly rasped, his fingers trembling again in that strange passion. 'Which god, Mr. Belton? Jehova or Oannes—the Man-Christ or the Toad-Thing—god of earth, air or water? *Ia-R'Iyeh, Cthulhu fhtagn, Yibb-Tstll, na Yot-Sottoth!* I know many gods, sir!"

"Again, jerkily, he filled his glass from the pitcher, literally gulping at the sediment-loaded stuff until I thought he must choke. When finally he put down his empty glass, I could see that he had himself once more under a semblance of control.

"'That second time,' he continued, 'everyone believed I had fallen into the tank in my sleep; as a boy I had been something of a somnambulist. At first even I believed it was so, for at that time I was still blind to the creature's power over me. They say that the hagfish is blind, too, Mr. Belton, and members of the better-known species certainly are—but my hag

was not blind. Indeed, primitive or not, I believe that after the first three or four times he was actually able to recognize me!

"'I used to keep the creature in the tank where you saw the hammerheads. Forbidding anyone else entry, I would pay my visits at night, whenever the mood came on me; and he would be there, waiting for me, with his ugly mouth groping at the glass and his queer eyes peering out in awful anticipation. He would go straight to the steps as soon as I began to climb them, waiting for me in the water until I joined him there. I would wear a snorkel, so as to breathe while he—while it—'

"Haggopian was trembling all over now and dabbing angrily at his face. Glad of the chance to take my eyes off the man's oddly glistening features, I finished off my drink and refilled my glass with the remainder of the beer in the bottle. The chill was long off the beer by then, and it was flat. I drank solely to relieve my mouth of its clammy dryness.

"'The worst of it was,' he went on after a while, 'that what was happening to me was not against my will. As with the sharks and other host fish, so with me. I *enjoyed* each hideous liaison as the drug addict delights in his delusions, and the results of my addiction were no less destructive.

"'I experienced no more periods of delirium, such as I had known following my first two meetings with the creature, but I could feel that my strength was slowly but surely being sapped. My assistants knew that I was ill, naturally, but it was my wife who suffered the most. I could have little to do with her, do you see? If we had led any sort of normal life, then she must surely have seen the marks on my body. Oh, but I waxed cunning in my addiction, and no one guessed the truth behind the strange sickness which was slowly killing me, draining me of my life's blood.

"'A little over a year later, in 1958, when I knew I was on death's very door-step, I allowed myself to be talked into undertaking another voyage. My wife loved me deeply still, and believed a prolonged trip might do me good. I think that Costas had begun to suspect the truth by then. I even caught him one day in the forbidden room, staring curiously at the cyclostome in its tank.

"'His suspicions became more obvious, however, when I told him that the creature was to go with us. He was against the idea from the start. I argued that my studies were incomplete and that when I was finished with the hag I intended to release it at sea. I intended no such thing. In fact, I did

not believe I would last the voyage out. From fourteen stone in weight, I was down to less than eight.

"'We were anchored off the Great Barrier Reef the night my wife found me with the hagfish. The others were asleep after a party aboard. I had insisted that they all drink and make merry so that I could be sure not to be disturbed, but my wife had remained sober and I had not noticed. The first thing I knew of it was when I saw her standing at the side of the tank, looking down at me and the … *thing!*

"'I will always remember her face, the horror and awful knowledge written upon it—and her scream, the way it split the night!

"'By the time I got out of the tank, she was gone. She had fallen or thrown herself overboard. Her scream had roused the crew, and Costas was the first to be up and about. He saw me before I could cover myself. I took three of the men and went out in a little boat to look for my wife, to no avail. When we got back, Costas had finished off the hagfish. He had gaffed the thing to death. Its head was little more than a bloody pulp, but even in death its suctorial mouth continued to rasp away—at nothing.

"'After that, for a whole month, I would have Costas nowhere near me. I do not think he wanted to be near me. I believe that he knew my grief was not solely for my poor wife …

"'Well, that was the end of the first phase, Mr. Belton. I rapidly regained my health, the years fell off my face and body, until I was almost the same man I had been. I could never be exactly the same, though. For one thing, I had lost all my hair. As I have said, the creature had taken me to death's very doorstep. Also, to remind me of the horror, there were the scars on my body and a greater scar on my mind: the look on my wife's face when last I had seen her.

"'During the next year I finished my book, mentioning nothing of my discoveries during the course of my Manatee Survey, nothing of my experiences with the awful fish. I dedicated the book to the memory of my poor wife, but yet another year was to pass before I could get the episode with the hagfish completely out of my system. From then on I could not bear even to think back on my terrible obsession.

"'It was shortly after I married for the second time that phase two began …

"'For some time, I had been experiencing a strange pain in my abdomen just above my navel, but had not troubled myself to see a doctor. I have an

abhorrence of doctors. Within six months of the wedding, the pain had disappeared—to be replaced by something far worse.

"'Knowing my terror of medical men, my new wife kept my secret; and though we neither of us knew it, that was the worst thing we could have done. Perhaps if I had seen about the thing sooner—

"'You see, Mr. Belton, I had developed—yes, an organ! An appendage, a snout-like thing had grown out of my stomach, with a tiny hole at its tip like a second navel. Eventually, of course, I was obliged to see a doctor; and after he examined me and told me the worst I swore him—or, rather, I paid him—to secrecy. The organ could not be removed, he said. It was part of me; it had its own blood vessels, a major artery, and connections with my lungs and stomach. It was not malignant in the sense of a morbid tumour.

"'Other than this, he was unable to explain the thing away. After an exhaustive series of tests, though, he was further able to say that my blood, too, had undergone a change. There seemed to be far too much salt in my system. The doctor told me then that by all rights I ought not to be alive.

"'Nor did it stop there, Mr. Belton, for soon other changes started to take place—this time in the snout-like organ itself—when the tiny navel began to open up at its tip!

"'And then … and then … my poor wife … *and my eyes!*'

"Once more, Haggopian had to stop. He sat there gulping like—like a fish out of water—with his whole body trembling violently and the thin streams of moisture trickling down his face. Again he filled his glass and drank deeply of the filthy liquid; and once more he wiped at his ghastly face. My own mouth had gone very dry again, and if I had had something to say, I very much doubt I could have managed it.

"'I—it seems—you—' the Armenian half-gulped, half-rasped, then uttered a weird, harshly choking bark before finally settling himself to finishing his unholy narrative. Now his voice was less human than any voice I had ever heard before:

"'You—have—more nerve than I thought, Mr. Belton, and—you were right: indeed, you are not easily shocked or frightened. In the end, it is I who am the coward, for I cannot tell the rest of the tale. I can only—show you, and then you must leave. You may wait for Costas at the pier…'

"With that, Haggopian slowly stood up and peeled off his open shirt. Hypnotized, I watched as he began to unwind the cummerbund at his waist,

watched as his *organ* came into view, as it blindly groped in the light like the snout of a rooting pig! But the thing was not a snout.

"Its end was an open, gasping mouth—red and loathsome, with rows of rasp-like teeth—and in its sides breathing gill slits showed, moving in and out as the thing sucked at thin air!

"Even then the horror was not at an end, for as I lurched reelingly to my feet, the Armenian took off those hellish sunglasses. For the first time, I saw his eyes: *his bulging fish eyes—without whiles, like jet marbles, oozing painful tears in the constant ache of an alien environment*—eyes *adapted for the murky gloom of the deeps!*

"I remember how, as I fled blindly down the beach to the pier, Haggopian's last words rang in my ears; the words he rasped as he threw down the cummerbund and removed the dark-lensed sunglasses from his face:

"'Do not pity me, Mr. Belton,' he had said. 'The sea was ever my first love and there is much I do not know of her even now—but I will, I will. And I shall not be alone of my kind among the Deep Ones. There is one I know to be waiting even now, and one other yet to come!'

"During the short trip back to Kletnos, numb though my mind ought to have been, the journalist in me took over and I thought back to Haggopian's hellish story and its equally hellish implications. I thought of his great love of the ocean, of the strangely cloudy liquid which helped to sustain him, and of the thin film of protective slime which glistened on his face and presumably covered the rest of his body. I thought of his weird forebears and the exotic gods they had worshipped, of 'things that came up out of the sea to mate with men!'

"I thought of the fresh marks I had seen on the undersides of the sharks in the great tank, marks made by no ordinary parasite, for Haggopian had returned his lampreys to the sea all of three years earlier; and I thought of that second wife who, rumour had it, died of some 'exotic wasting disease'. Finally, I thought of those other rumours I had heard of his *third* wife; how she was no longer living with him—but of the latter, it was not until we docked at Kletnos proper that I learned how those rumours, understandable though the mistake was, were in fact mistaken.

"For it was then, as the faithful Costas helped the old woman from the boat, that she stepped on her trailing shawl. That shawl and her veil were one and the same garment, so that her clumsiness caused a momentary

exposure of her face, neck, and one shoulder to a point just above her left breast. In that same instant of inadvertent unveiling, I saw the woman's face for the first time—and also the livid scars where they began just beneath her collarbone.

"At last I understood the strange magnetism Haggopian had held for her, that magnetism not unlike the unholy attraction between the morbid hagfish of his story and its all-too-willing hosts. I understood, too, my previous interest in her dehydrated face—which yet had classic features.

"For now I could see that it was the face of a certain Athenian model lately of note: Haggopian's third wife, wed to him on her eighteenth birthday! And then, as my whirling thoughts flashed back yet again to that second wife, "buried at sea", I knew finally, cataclysmically what the Armenian had meant when he said: "There is one I know to be waiting even now, and one other yet to come!'"

VII: Escape!

Despite my personal problems—or perhaps more correctly because of them—the horror of Belton's tale reached out to me. And for all his journalistic background, I guessed that he had coloured the story not at all, that it had happened just the way he told it. But while during its telling there had been so much in the story I could relate to my own knowledge of the Deep Ones, still I had not in this instance found anything to prove conclusively their inimical nature. Instead, Haggopian's case had inspired in me a sort of pity; I had felt a definite empathy with the man in his extremes of horror. Oh, I myself could now testify to the fact that the Deep Ones were devious in their ways, no doubt of that—but deadly? A threat to the world? To the universe? That was something entirely different.

By now, however, my legs felt stiff from standing so awkwardly on the chair, and one of them was about to go to sleep on me. I told Belton I would be back in a few minutes, and got painfully down. Pacing back and forth for a little while in the confines of my tank until my joints were eased, I found myself dwelling morbidly on Haggopian's dreams, which had seemed so reminiscent of my own, and on his peculiar genealogy. My background, too, had more than its fair share of anomalies, which I must certainly look into if ever my position permitted it.

Then, as I was about to climb back up on to my chair, there came the sound of unhurried feet outside, and a few seconds later I heard Belton's door once more thrown open. Almost immediately, the door was slammed shut and barred again, and the footsteps paused outside my own door. I heard Sarah's voice raised in what sounded like a request, and Semple's firm refusal before all sounds passed on and faded away.

After a little while, I got back up on my chair and tapped on the grille. Belton looked up and managed a wry smile. "They don't intend to finish me just yet, at any rate," he said. "Look here, I've been given a blanket!" Then his face hardened. "There were three of them—three Deep Ones."

I nodded, though he could hardly have seen more than the merest movement of my head through the grille. "You knew them by their looks?"

"By their looks, their smell, their damned fish-eyes. They're unmistakable. In New England it's called the "Innsmouth Look". Who is the big hulking one?"

"Sargent, you mean? He's some sort of servant around here."

Belton nodded. "A changeling who never quite made it. Faithful to the Deep Ones as a dog to its master."

"How do you mean, 'changeling'?" I asked. "Not in Haggopian's way, surely?"

He shrugged. "There are changelings and changelings. It was a long time after Haggopian that I started to look at the native legends and myth-patterns of the Solomon Islands. You'll remember he found his hagfish off San Cristobal? Well, all anyone need do is pick up a book on Oceanic Mythology at any bookshop, and he'll find more than enough evidence of the Deep Ones and changelings. The natives out there know well enough of the *adaro,* 'sea-sprites' who are part-human, part-fish. They visit men in their dreams and teach them strange songs and chants, and they call to them on conches and tempt them into the sea …" He paused for a moment, then continued: "But no, the half-people here in this place are not of Haggopian's sort. I rather fancy that he was the first of his kind —'protogenus', you might say—and that his inherent Deep One genes were both activated and mutated by the advent of the hagfish. More than that I can't say. I'm no biologist." He looked up at me strangely, quizzically, I thought; but before I could comment, he went quickly on. "But as I was saying, these people are not Haggopian's sort."

"Then just what sort are they?" I asked.

“I haven’t seen them all,” he answered, “but there are three types here, at least. Sargent is landborn and didn't make the change. One of his parents was a Deep One, but the human side was dominant. And for all their prowess with drugs, the true Deep Ones haven’t been able to bring about the full change in him. Or perhaps they started on him too late, when he was too set in his human ways, or when his body was no longer able to accomplish the metamorphosis. Incidentally, one of the side-effects of their damned drugs when they don’t work is to stunt the mind and retard its processes. That poor devil Sargent looks to me to be a classic example.

“Then there’s the one called Semple. He’s a half-breed, too, except that in his case the dominant side was all Deep One. He’s just about ready to take to the water, maybe already has, in which case he’s a true amphibian. And there was one in the car whose smell nearly turned my stomach. My guess is that he was an original Deep One, with no human blood in him at all. That type can’t stay out of the sea very long.” He paused, then after a moment went on.

“Yes, it looks to me like they’re after a set-up here similar to what they once had in America. Back in the early 1920s, Innsmouth was crawling with all types of Deep Ones. It was one of their biggest strongholds, remote and decaying, and of course there was one of their submarine cities close by.”

“Y’ha-Nthlei?” I asked, knowing that I was right.

He frowned up at me. “Hmm! You know a bit more than I thought. Yes, Y’ha-Nthlei, and they had been mingling the blood for ages. That part of the American coastline, just like this part here in England, has always been ‘mermaid country’. You see what I mean? Anyway, in 1928, government agents got wind of what was going on and stepped in. They just about levelled half the place, but they in no way finished off the job … more’s the pity. I don’t suppose the government men really knew what they were dealing with …”

As he finished speaking, the scientist in me suddenly rebelled against all I had already more than half-accepted. “Listen,” I began, with something of desperation in my voice, “a moment ago you mentioned that you’re not a biologist. Well, I am a biologist—a marine biologist—and I just can’t make myself accept that there could ever be issue from this sort of union. It’s just too fantas—”

“No,” he shook his head, “it’s not too fantastic at all. You yourself could mate with a pygmy girl and raise six-foot sons.”

“Of course I could,” I exploded. “But not with a damned frog!”

“Oh?” He peered up at the grille. “It’s not so very long ago that they used to test a woman for pregnancy by injecting a female frog with her urine. If the frog spawned, the woman was pregnant. It actually works. Are you saying there’s no link?”

“Oh, I know all about that,” I told him, “and if there were enough time, I could even explain it to you, but—”

“But, but, *but!*” he cried out. “There can be no argument. It’s real, I tell you! Changelings? My God, just look at the life-cycle of the common frog! And as for why they want you—why, you’ve already answered that one yourself.”

“What? How do you mean?”

“You’re a biologist, aren’t you?”

“A marine biologist, yes.”

He nodded. “Yes, and they’ve been recruiting all sorts to their cause. Doctors, scientists, biologists … men, yes, human beings. Every man has his price, they say—and the Deep Ones know it.”

“I still don’t follow you.”

“Don’t you? You must know what a clone is.”

“A clone? Of course I know what a—” I stopped short. “What are you getting at?”

“Just this: I believe they’re about ready to start cloning Deep Ones!”

“What?”

“I have evidence, I tell you! And something else: in all of the experiments performed so far in cloning, which do you suppose have been most effective? What type of creature may most readily be cloned?”

The short hairs rose of their own accord on the back of my neck, and I shuddered uncontrollably. “The amphibia!” I answered in a whisper.

“Yes.” He vigorously nodded his head. “Damn frogs! And that’s what they’re after: an entire submarine world full of Deep Ones—every body of water on Earth swarming with them—and when there are too many of them for us to handle …”

“Then?”

He hugged his blanket around his shoulders. “We’ll be herded, like cattle—and then they’ll be able to concentrate on their main objective.”

“Which is?”

“To release Cthulhu, of course. To set that ageless monster free!”

“But surely Cthulhu is a purely mythical creature?” I argued. “The ‘god’ of their faith? And the way they tell it, he’s benign and—”

“Benign?” He choked on the word. “My God! Do you know what you're saying? Not only is Cthulhu real, he’s responsible for half of this crazy world’s madness! Those are not ordinary dreams he sends out from R'lyeh, but nightmares! Hideous visions to turn the minds of men and drive them mad!”

For a moment, I was gripped by the intensity of his belief—dragged by it to the rim of a chasm of utmost lunacy—but still something in me, some imp of the perverse, refused to let me finally accept the truth of his statements.

“No,” I said. “I just can’t believe it. The rest of it I’ll allow, everything, but Cthulhu—”

“Listen, man,” he stopped me, “I know he’s real. Christ, if you’d read the *Johansen Narrative*—and I have—then you’d know it, too!”

“The *Johansen Narrative?*” I said. “I never heard of it.”

“No,” Belton was suddenly calmer, resigned, “and I don’t suppose it makes much difference, really.” He shook his head disgustedly. “If you did read it, you’d probably call it fiction. But let me tell you, anyway:

“In 1925, the bed of the Pacific buckled and tossed R’lyeh up to the surface. Johansen was the sole survivor of a ship that landed on that hellish upheaval. It was a crazy place, of monoliths and mad angles, all covered with monstrous carvings. Johansen’s story, a tale he didn’t long survive, is more terrifying than anything I’ve told you so far. But he saw Cthulhu, and his hair turned white at what he saw!”

“Go on,” I pressed him. “What, exactly, did he see?” Before he could answer, as I tried to ease my legs by changing my position, the chair rocked beneath me. I held tight to the corners of the grille to steady myself, and felt the metal plate move under the pressure exerted by my fingers. In another moment, I had managed to steady myself.

“Have you got that thing loose?” Belton asked, peering up at the grille. “I thought I saw it move, then.”

“It did, yes,” I answered. “Just let me get this last screw loose, and—”

I took up the screwdriver, turned its blade in the slot of the screw—and the grille moved. Three or four more turns of the blade, and it was almost

loose. I forced the grille down until it hung from that single screw, then stared at the face of Belton through the small opening. He stared back—stared up at me—and in a moment his mouth fell open and his eyes went wide.

Then he stumbled back, away from the metal wall, away from me, arms wide and flailing, an inarticulate gurgle welling in his throat.

I was too amazed at Belton's inexplicable reaction to do or say anything on the spur of the moment, and only a second or so later it would have been impractical to try, for even as I heard the sound of muffled footsteps from outside and the grating of bars being removed—even as I fumblingly replaced the grille and stepped clumsily down from the chair—the door of my tank burst open and Sargent, the doctor, and one other entered single-file and in great haste. From the adjacent tank, I heard Belton shouting something in a defiant voice, and the sound of vicious cursing and desperate activity, followed by a sickening thud of flesh against the wall as a human scream, rising, was cut short.

Caught red-handed, I faced the three who cautiously approached me. I had placed the screwdriver out of sight in my pocket; now I thought to reach for it, and only just managed to check myself. The tool would be of no use against the three of them. I needed to keep it until later, when there might be only one of these creatures to deal with.

As they backed me up against the wall, I merely glanced at Sargent, whose face was now puffed up in rage, and at the doctor, who bit his lip in annoyance—but as for the third one …

… him I could not take my eyes off!

For if he were not that same creature which had dragged me from the boat in the bay, then certainly he was its brother! The Deep One came closer, fish-eyes unblinking—approaching with movements which were half-slither, half-hop—and my instinctive reaction was to flee. Then I remembered how weak I was supposed to be, and backed along the wall until the back of my legs struck the edge of the bed. Down I fell on the bed, unresisting as the three closed with me and took hold of my arms.

While Sargent and the Deep One held me, the doctor produced a needle and hovered over me. "So," he said, "we found a way to chat with our friend next door, did we?" He glanced up at the grille which had fallen half open of its own accord, then at the chair where it stood close to the metal

wall. “And doubtless he told you many lies. Well, no matter—no matter at all.”

He slid the needle into my arm, and in the space of a few seconds I felt a numbness creeping over me. I closed my eyes, and the two who held me released their grip. Their voices came to me from far away.

I heard Sargent say: “The fish—he’s taken some of them. Bones over here.” And he was answered by another voice—that of the Deep One, whose *texture* and *tone* still do not bear detailed description—which seemed to concur with and approve of Sargent’s observation.

Then the doctor said: “Yes, he makes rapid progress. Sarah made a good choice. But it was a mistake to put Belton next door. Still, what’s done is done.” I felt his fingers at my neck, probing gently in that area where the skin was rough through my constant chafing and rubbing. Then he lifted the lid of my right eye, and his face swam into view. He smiled, but his face was out of focus, so that his expression seemed to me like the grin of one of hell’s own demons. “Rapid progress, indeed!” he repeated, lowering my eyelid like a shutter and allowing me to slide down into the darkness of oblivion …

And again the nightmare—but this time more monstrous than anything I had dreamed so far.

… I swam in frozen, weed-shrouded deeps between basaltic towers of titanic proportions, and behind these massive stone facades I knew that somewhere the loathly Lord Cthulhu dreamed his own damnable dreams of dominion. I was searching for something, a door, yes, and at last I found it looming open behind a slab of coral-encrusted basalt fallen in ages past from the main structure.

Down into gloom I swam, in lightless vaults whose immeasurable antiquity numbed the mind, until finally I came to those inner chambers which housed the sleeping god. And, at last, glowing in fires of luminescent rottenness, I saw Cthulhu Himself!

But it was an unquiet sleep that the Great Old One slept, and his demon claws tightened threateningly on the sides of his great throne even as I watched, while his folded wings moved as if to open over his tentacled head and lift him up from the deeps to the unsuspecting world above! The eyes in his great face were closed—which I knew was a mercy—and the tentacles that fringed and bearded his head like the tendrils of some obscene

anemone were almost, but not quite, still, so that I went carefully indeed, for fear of waking him.

Then, when I would have turned to steal silently away, he sensed me. His wings stopped their trembling; his fitfully scrabbling claws became purposeful and started to reach out towards me; his eyes became great slits which hideously, hypnotically began to open; and, horror of horrors, his face tentacles uncoiled like waking snakes, groping with unimaginable intent in my direction where I backed frantically away, stirring up the aeon-deposited silt and slime in my haste to be out of that place! And as I fled—

—**S**o I awakened.

Sweat—soaked, I awakened to darkness. The light was out, and the tank was stifling as a tomb. As my dream receded, I remembered all that had gone before, and felt for the screwdriver where it lay in my pocket. Reassured, I listened to the pounding of my heart until it slowed and returned to normal. Not too far away, I could hear the gentle *hush* of the sea against the beach, and guessed that the tide was in and that it was night outside. Night, and the place was dark and silent—or was it?

From somewhere overhead, a muted creaking sounded, and the merest suspicion of voices told of life in the building above me. Anger—yes, and hatred, too—tightened my face as I determined to wait no longer, but make my escape at the very next opportunity.

And with the decision came pain, enough to make me put my hands up to my neck and feel tenderly the ruptured skin beneath my jaw on both sides. I felt … and what I discovered brought instant panic! For the lesions beneath my unbelieving fingers were fresh and deep, regular slits that ran parallel to my jaw-bone and felt like flaps of raw flesh.

Sheer panic, but only for a moment, and then I knew a cold and calculating calm that should have frightened me almost as much as its cause —which was a sudden and shockingly illuminating knowledge of the truth!

The truth at last, yes, for of course I now knew. I knew what had frightened Belton when first he had seen my face through the open grille, knew also why I had been “chosen” in the first place. Oh, there was much I still did not know, but these things I knew—in one cataclysmic moment I knew them—these and one other. That through no doing of my own, *I had acquired the Innsmouth Look,* and that one way or another I would make the Deep Ones pay!

A moment later, I slipped out of my clothes and into the water in the sunken area of the tank. Even in the dark the fish were easy to find; I seemed to sense their whereabouts. They were not yet dead, though very nearly so, but even had I found them floating belly up on the surface, still I would have eaten of them. Oh, yes, for I would need what strength I could muster now for what was next to come …

Semple did not come alone, but with Sargent. Lying on my bed in feigned sleep, I silently cursed my luck as the door opened with its customary clanging, and their voices reached me. My plan had depended upon only one of them coming to see me, for come he surely must, sooner or later, if only to replenish my "food" and see how I was"progressing". I had not had to wait for very long, but now I was at a loss what to do; it fully appeared that I might have to put my plan back. Then I felt the light burn through my closed eyelids, and heard Semple step through the raised portal into the tank. As he did so, he said to Sargent, "Here, take the flashlight."

Sargent answered, "Should I wait?"

"No need," Semple answered. "He'll be weak as a kitten. Shove the door to, but don't bar it. I'll let myself out."

So, I was to be left alone with Semple, was I? My pulse quickened on the instant.

"Good-night, sir," came Sargent's phlegmy reply, then the dull thump of the door closing, and finally the sound of slow footsteps retreating.

Now I had to fight to control my breathing, my pounding heart as Semple approached my bed to stand over me. What was he doing, standing so still? Did he suspect?

I was startled at what came next. I had been prepared for a hand on my arm, shaking me "awake"—not the gentle tremor of Semple's fingers at the freshly opened gill-slits of my neck!

I started up, my hands reaching to close viciously on his own silk-covered throat before he could cry out, forcing him down to the metal floor and holding him there, motionless, until his eyes began to glaze and his fleshy lips started to tremble spasmodically. By now, Sargent would be well away, in his room up above in the main building. Still, best to be sure.

Gradually, I released my hold on Semple's neck, and he drew air—but only with difficulty. The silk scarf he still wore had been displaced, and beneath my fingers I could see his bruised and battered gills. Already I had

done him grave injury. Not fatal, however, as yet, for he was an amphibian and could use his lungs like a normal human being.

“Fool!” he hoarsely croaked. “You’ll pay!”

“No, you'll pay, Semple—for what you’ve done to me. Now listen. This can be easy or hard—hard on you. I'm getting out of here, and I’m taking Belton with me. He's not in the next tank; I know because I've looked. You left the light on in there, and the place is empty. So the first thing you're going to do is tell me where he is.”

“You … can't help Belton,” he wheezed. “Not now.” Then his voice became pleading. “Listen, John, you don’t know what you're doing. The penalties for—”

“Penalties? I’ll pay no penalties, Semple. Not to you, or the Deep Ones, or anyone. You’re coming with us—you, me, and Belton—and there’s no chance my story won’t be believed. Let’s face it, there isn't a medical man in England who wouldn’t know you for an alien on sight! Whatever you are—half fish, frog, whatever—they’ll declare you inhuman. And just suppose they do mistake you for some poor unfortunate freak … what about me? What you’ve done to me—or started to do—will be more than sufficient proof, even without Belton’s word. I’ll have the authorities down on this place before you can turn about!”

“Oh?” he croaked as I allowed him just sufficient air to keep talking. “And how will all of this help you? What good will it do you? You’re a Deep One, John. You always have been. The seeds were there all along, but they were dormant. We’ve only set them working—accelerated a natural process—to bring about the change. When it’s complete, then you’ll be an amphibian, a Deep One.”

“But I was a human being!” I hissed through clenched teeth, fighting the urge to throttle him there and then. “I still am. What you’ve done to me will go no further. I haven’t taken a single one of your damned pills for more than a week.”

“You what?” He choked the words out, stopped struggling, and gazed up at me in utter astonishment. “Man, have you any idea just what those pills were?”

“Oh, I know what they were,” I answered. “They did this to me—” and I inclined my head, showing him my neck.

“No,” he croaked, squirming beneath my grip. “The drugs for the change—the hormones and catalysts—they were in your food, in the injections

you've been given. You can't stop the change, John; it's irreversible. It's in you, working even now. But those other drugs, the pills, *they were to help you retain your sanity!*"

"What?"

"What have you done, you fool? You were a perfect subject!"

The wave of horror—horror and red rage—which his words conjured in me was almost too great to bear. I bit my tongue and felt tears of frustration wash down my face as I tightened my grip on him. "You … you … *you!*" I hissed furiously. Then I threw back my head and screamed voicelessly, in my mind, screamed through a mist shot with blood as I applied still more pressure through my fingers and squeezed, squeezed, squeezed!

Gone now were all thoughts of preserving Semple's life, of keeping him as a specimen with which to alert the authorities. I myself should be evidence enough. My own person, coupled with what Belton had to tell, should satisfy even the most—

—Belton! I still didn't know where they had put him!

I released my grip on Semple's throat, and his head thumped on the metal floor like a lump of lead. His eyes had almost left their sockets, and his gills were crushed to pulp. He was stone dead.

All emotion left me in a moment. All horror, hatred, passion, drained from me in a split second. I had murdered a man!

Then—

No, I told myself, I was no murderer. I had merely killed a Deep One, destroyed an enemy of Man, crushed a scorpion. I shuddered in loathing of the thing on the floor, took out my screwdriver, glanced once more about the naked tank which had housed me for … how long?—then carefully pushed the door open and stepped through into a gloomy corridor.

It was not completely dark, though nearly so, and I could only just see to make my way to the door of the adjacent tank. It, too, was unbarred, and I managed to open it silently, sufficiently to peer inside. Momentarily the light blinded me, but then … I was correct: Belton had been taken elsewhere. His blanket lay on the floor, but otherwise the tank was quite empty. Then, remembering that Semple had told me there were three tanks, I moved cautiously along the corridor until I found the third door.

This door was also unbarred—which alone seemed to suggest that the prisoner was not to be found here—but I decided nevertheless to enter the tank and make sure. As I was about to do so, I became aware of a red,

dimly glowing light behind me. My eyes were more accustomed to the gloom now, and as I turned I could make out the shape of a door in the wall of excavated rock directly opposite me across the wooden flooring of the corridor. The upper panel of the door—of conventional design, unlike the metal manholes of the tanks—was of frosted glass, behind which the red light burned.

For a moment I paused breathlessly. I still did not know how I would get out of the place; and what if there were Deep Ones behind the door? True, the place seemed silent enough, and even with my ear to the frosted glass panel I could hear nothing at all of voices or movements …

—Well, I must do something, for plainly I couldn't stay here much longer. For all I knew, Semple's companion of a few minutes ago might well be up above, even now waiting for him to put in an appearance. He would have to wait a long time.

Since it seemed unlikely that Belton could be in the unbarred third tank, perhaps he had been put in the room with the redly glowing light. In any case, my curiosity had been piqued. Despite my terrifically dangerous position, I had to know what lay behind that door.

Carefully, with each and every nerve in my body shrieking its tension, I turned the knob of the door and opened it, then entered silently and closed the door with the merest click behind me. The room was completely still, with only that single, dim red bulb glowing at some indeterminate distance from me. On the wall, my hand found a nest of light switches, one of which was depressed. I tripped this one switch and the red light went out. Immediately, my heart skipped a beat… but nothing else happened. I switched the light on again—and a second, a third. Three red lights, evenly spaced out, now lit the gloom; but their combined light gave little more illumination than one bulb on its own. I tripped a fourth switch … and was almost blinded as the white glare of a large industrial bulb blazed into life close to where I stood!

Wide-eyed in shock, I gritted my teeth, expecting … something!

But no, the seconds passed with the leaden thumping of my heart, and there was no sign of life. The place was still, and utterly silent. I started to breathe again, and began to take in the size of the subterranean room in which I now found myself. After spending so long in the tank, this place and its unexpected hugeness completely overawed me. Tiled walls stretched away for at least thirty yards or more, and the width of the room was only a

little less than its length. The entire area beneath the place on the beach had been completely hollowed out.

A tiled walkway some ten feet wide surrounded a large sunken area six or seven feet deep, with metal steps leading into—or rather out of—the pool. Without the slightest shadow of a doubt, this was a pool, empty at the moment, but destined for a great deal of use. The unfinished pool which fronted the building up above was merely for show, an acceptable excuse for cutting a channel from the sea direct to the Deep Ones' headquarters; and this secret pool was where the Deep Ones would emerge, unseen by human eyes, whenever they came in from the ocean.

A pair of large pipes just big enough to take two swimmers abreast showed their shiny white mouths in one of the sunken walls, and in my mind's eye I could picture monstrous frog-shapes emerging, convening in the salty water of the pool and doing … what?

What in hell was this place really for? What did the Deep Ones plan? The pool was a big one; why did they need a pool so large? Was Belton right in everything he suspected? Perhaps this was where I might find out.

There were doors in the tiled walls of the room, each one bearing a name or title on a plastic plate. Moving round the pool (apart from the comparatively low ceiling and the absence of diving boards, it was for all the world like being in a small, deserted swimming-bath after hours). I paused to peer at the first nameplate. It said 'Puth'uum-lahoie'! Was this really someone's name? I tried the door, but it was locked. The next door, which had an as-yet-unmarked plate, stood slightly ajar. I entered a medium-sized room piled high with crates, boxes, and sections of metal shelving waiting for assembly. There was nothing there to interest me, however, so I quickly moved on.

Then, at the far end of the pool, I came to a door with Semple's name on it. I entered, put on the light … then stood gaping in astonishment at the veritable library of occult and esoteric literature contained within that small enclosed area. It would have been pointless even to attempt to remember more than half a dozen titles from those ceiling-high shelves, much less list them; they meant little enough to me, and would doubtless mean nothing at all to anyone but a student of such matters. While Semple had told me that he was just such a student, I had never thought of his obsession in terms of such magnitude. But, much as I would have liked to stay longer and look into some of these disquieting volumes, I still had to find Belton; and my

position must surely have been growing more and more untenable by the minute.

Hurriedly, I moved on, trying doors and briefly entering those that stood open, discovering nothing of any great importance and growing ever more aware of a rapidly thickening aura of hideous danger. Then, when I had almost returned to my starting point, after examining the rooms of several unrecognized human names—and one at least which I did know, that of "Dr Abraham Waite", the same "doctor" who had so misused me—and those of true Deep Ones with names every bit as unearthly as the almost unpronounceable "Puth'uum—lahoie", I was brought up short by a plate bearing a name which I immediately recognized.

The plate said simply: "I. Zchaskov'—but the Igor Zchaskov I knew of was a Russian biochemist whose work in certain areas of biology—including cloning—had made him a fairly famous (and, in other quarters more concerned with ethics than results, an unprincipled and infamous) name in his field. He had defected from the Soviet Union in 1964, since which time he had gradually faded from the limelight. And now …?

The door of Zchaskov's room was open and I entered; and in less than a minute I had satisfied myself that indeed Belton was correct in all he suspected of Deep One ambitions and motivations. The room was nothing less than a small but extremely sophisticated and well-equipped laboratory, and to me it was abundantly clear what Zchaskov's work was to be. This was the room where eventually he would attempt to manufacture an army of identical Deep Ones!

I had seen enough. Now, without more ado, I must find Belton and get out of this monstrous place. I left Zchaskov's laboratory, went to the main door, switched off all the lights except for the one small red bulb whose glow had led me to the place, and silently slipped out into the corridor. The oval door of the third tank stood before me, my last shot before attempting to discover a way out of this nest of evil.

I stepped across the corridor, pulled the door open, and entered. The light was on, which was as well, for I would not have known where to locate the switch, and the tank was—empty?

No, not empty, for Belton's clothing lay in a disordered heap in one corner. Also, there were thick red smears on the metal floor …

My flesh crawled as I froze, turned to stone by a movement glimpsed in the corner of my eye, a movement so slight as to be almost unnoticeable.

Something was coming up over the lip of the sunken area, following a scarlet smear where it had dripped over the edge: a conch, one of those "unique" sinistral conches with which this entire nightmare had commenced.

On legs which were suddenly weak as columns of jelly I moved to the edge of the sunken area. It was half full of water that was alive with conches. Directly beneath where I stood, a barrel-shaped knot of the slugs bobbed gently in the water on something which slowly revolved beneath their moving weight. Even as I watched, a cluster of them fell from the half-submerged object, fell bloated and red and … *sated!*

"Acclimatization! … Immersion in a brine solution at a controlled temperature! … Fed with especially rich nutrients!"

As God is my witness—if God there ever was—the eyeless, half-devoured, bloody gobbet of flesh in the water was all that remained of Jeremy Belton!

VIII: Changeling

The rest of it is a blur, a frenzy of memories seen now in my mind's eye like a stroboscopic nightmare. I remember finding a metal staircase that led upward, and a door that opened on to the beach on the southern side of the main building. I remember hugging the shadows beneath leering, peeping stars as I fled to the rocks of the southern promontory, and how I made my way around that tall tumble of boulders until I waded, then swam in the cool waters of the pool as the sea receded. I recall the way the moon silvered the water as I swam, adding its lustre to a fire of morbid excitement that burned in my veins. And for all that a greater passion drove me, there was a lure in the nighted ocean that was near—hypnotic.

Then I remember stumbling from the water on the southern side of the bay arm, to be confronted by the *thing* which grew menacingly out of the shadows until it towered over me like a nodding stalagmite of sentient slime—the shoggoth, whose myriad eyes gazed at me, whose pseudopod arms reached out avidly to encircle me—before it shrank back in seeming consternation to stand mute and uncertain, though still vaguely threatening, beside an upright needlelike boulder large as itself. Then … a warning. As if to show me that my identity and loyalties remained in doubt, that the …

creature … was far from satisfied with my authenticity, it turned on the rock standing up from the damp sands and enveloped it in an instant.

This *envelopment* was simply that: the shoggoth flowed forward and enclosed the rock. Then … there followed a hissing, slight at first but rapidly increasing to a subdued, contained roar. I stood, trembling, dripping salt water, frozen in my terror, watching as the shoggoth's outline seemed to vibrate where its protoplasmic body crushed the solid stone it enclosed.

In some inexplicable way I was given to know the creature's purpose: to demonstrate its power, its awesome strength. And like a whale blowing, suddenly the top of the shoggoth opened (I can explain it no other way: its upper surface developed an aperture or orifice) and from this palpitating opening reeking furnace gasses rushed upwards in a roaring jet, carrying with them small, charred, sticky fragments of stone which rained down spatteringly to steam and hiss upon the beach. I covered my head with my arms to avoid being struck by this superheated debris and backed away: and as I retreated, so the shoggoth ended its display and flowed back into its original position. Now, where so recently the boulder had stood, a black circle of tarry liquid steamed and bubbled: and of the great rock in its original form, no slightest shadow remained.

Without more ado, as I continued to back away, the shoggoth melted back into the shadows of the beach and was gone. Just as poor Belton had done, this protoplasmic horror had finally accepted me for what I was rapidly becoming: a Deep One, and as such it could do me no harm.

Released from my paralysis of fright, at last I turned and ran; and there followed my long, loping, low-panting flight along the beach beneath the cliffs, until at last I climbed Seaham's old and crumbling sea-wall to the promenade, where I paused and drew breath as my eyes took in the silhouette of the seafront by night. I looked closer, staring into the darkness, unable to believe my good fortune. A light was on in Sam Hadley's window, and his battered old Ford stood on the pavement in front of his house.

My one thought now was to get as far away from Seaham as possible, give myself a little time to think things out, and work out a sure means of presenting my case to the authorities. A long taxi ride into Newquay would allow me sufficient time to compose myself, and once there I could go straight to the police. My best approach would be to report Jeremy Belton's death, which must surely be guaranteed to produce the desired result.

Before morning, the place on the beach would be crawling with police, and the plans of the Deep Ones in England would be completely scotched, blown sky high!

As to what would then become of me … only time would tell. I was not without influential friends. What could be done for me would be done. I could not, dared not believe that what had been started in me was truly without remedy; I had to cling to the belief that whatever else happened, I myself could be … put right.

And so I walked unsteadily along the promenade to Sam's place, made my way down the garden path, and knocked on his door. There was movement within; the door opened, and Sam stood in the night—shadowed hall.

"Sam." I said, "you don't know how glad I am to find you up! I have a job for you that will pay four times your normal rate, if only you'll—" And there I paused as I noticed the way he silently regarded me, his face white in the moonlight that flooded his doorway. "Sam?" I said. "Is something

He stepped to one side, and a previously hidden form suddenly loomed in the darkness of the hall behind him. A great hand shot out, grabbed me by the shoulder, and jerked me forward. I threw up my own hands, but too late. In the moment before a massive, club-like fist struck me in the forehead, I recalled something old Jason Ridley had told me when last I had tried to enlist Sam Hadley's services: that the people from the club "did a fair bit o' trade wi' um!" Then, as I reeled and fell into Hadley's garden, the owner of the sledge-like fists stepped into view: Sargent. And the way he and Hadley stood over me told me that indeed the latter was in league with the Deep Ones, and that once again I was in their power …

Somehow I held on to consciousness as I was picked up by Sargent and Hadley, carried down the garden path and out through the gate, to be bundled unceremoniously into the back of the old Ford. Then the car's doors slammed and the engine started into life. A moment more, and the car was making a three-point turn in the narrow roadway.

No need to wonder where I was being taken. Doubtless Semple's body had been discovered where I had left it, and the Deep Ones had sent Sargent after me. The trip was a matter of minutes by car. They had phoned Hadley; he had gone to the place on the beach to pick up Sargent; then, returning to Hadley's place, the two had simply waited for me.

As my head began to clear, I lay still and feigned unconsciousness, at the same time easing the rusty screwdriver out of my pocket. One thing was certain: come what may, I was not going back to Deep One headquarters. When the car turned left and picked up speed, I knew we were in Sea Lane, Seaham's 'main street' that led to the coastal trunk road, and so to Newquay. At the top of Sea Lane, two hundred yards beyond the village, there was a 'T' junction where the car would once again turn left. There, directly across the bar of the T was an old, deep, and derelict quarry whose fenced side ran parallel with the road for a distance of some thirty yards. Picturing the quarry as I remembered it from my many walks in the area, a desperate scheme began to form in my mind.

Carefully, moving my body as little and as slowly as possible, I eased myself up until I could see who was driving. It was Sargent, and that suited my scheme perfectly. I doubted if I could do what must be done to an entirely human person, no matter his affiliation with the horrors from the sea. Then I gathered my feet in beneath me and waited, crouching there in the dark interior of the car until Sargent began to apply the brakes as we approached the junction.

Just as the car turned left and started to accelerate, Hadley casually turned and looked directly into my face. His eyebrows shot up in shock, and he yelled: "*Sargent, he's*—"

But I had already looped my right arm round Sargent's neck, lifting his chin while I used my left hand to drive the blade of the screwdriver into his throat. Then, as he choked and grabbed with both hands at his spurting neck, I dropped the screwdriver, shoved him against the door, grabbed the steering wheel and jerked it to the right. The car careened across the road in a screeching of tyres, and mounted the kerb.

By now Hadley was trying to snatch my left hand away from the wheel. I obliged him, smashed the back of my fist into his face, and knew the satisfaction of feeling teeth give way under my knuckles. In the glare of the headlights as the car began to jounce on the uneven slope that formed the quarry's rim, I caught sight of a white wooden fence and knew that time had run out. Falling back, I yanked frenziedly at the door handle and hurled myself out into the night.

I bounced heavily through long grasses, tumbling halfwinded into the fence at the quarry's very lip. As I grabbed wildly at an iron upright, the bottom rail of the fence gave way and my lower body slipped through into

empty air. I hung on grimly as my arms took the full weight of my body. Below me there was only the darkness of the quarry's sheer depths—which suddenly erupted into a bright gout of fire as a loud explosion shook the night. My plan had worked: the car had plunged through the fence and fallen to the quarry's boulder-strewn floor. Pulling myself to safety, I looked down at the scene below.

The car was standing on its flattened nose in a sea of fire, its interior already a blazing inferno. Sam Hadley's ten-gallon tank must have been full to the brim. Even so, it was unlikely that anyone in the village had heard the crash. The nearest house was two hundred yards away, and the quarry's walls would have deadened the sound of exploding gasoline.

I fought my way through long grasses, gorse, and brambles to the road, crossed it, and started back down Sea Lane. My left ankle was sprained, causing me to limp badly, but other than that I seemed unhurt. For once, good fortune had been with me. I was thinking much more clearly now, and knew what I must do. The house of the village constable stood directly behind his tiny police station midway down Sea Lane. In this sleepy little village of less than six hundred inhabitants, there was no such thing as a twenty-four hour watch. I would have to wake the elderly constable, William Hearst, and if I knew "Billy" he'd be sleeping soundly.

In less than five minutes I was leaning against the wall of the police station and giving my ankle a moment's rest. The police station—humble symbol of sanity—I had thought never to see so glad a sight again. And still my luck was holding, for in all the village only one light shone out: a yellow ray of hope from the crack where the door stood ajar beneath the old blue lamp. Billy must be up working late on some report or other.

Then I remembered my last conversation with the ageing policeman: how he had told me he was due for retirement in only a few short weeks. There would be a new man in the job, now. But no matter; a policeman is a policeman …

Despite all I had been through, I was conscious of the hour and of my own wild appearance. But surely my condition would only substantiate what I had to say. So I entered that friendly building and crossed to the counter, behind which I knew stood an old oak desk. At the desk, his head bent low over a sheaf of papers, William Hearst's relief kept his lonely vigil. If he heard me enter, he gave no sign.

“Constable,” I said, my voice strange and strained even in my own ears. “Constable, I wish to report—” And at last he looked up.

His eyes widened in surprise, and his mouth fell open. Then, slowly rising to his feet, he regained his composure. He was a big man of about my own age. I didn’t recognize him, but I knew his looks at once!

“Wasn't really expectin’ you, Mr. Vollister,” the constable drawled. “And you got somethin’ or other to report, ’ave you?” His eyes bored into mine, unblinking eyes that were too big and round above a narrow nose and fleshy lips that curved upward now in an emotionless smile.

Another one of their “friends” in the village—*a changeling who hadn’t quite made it!*

I backed away, strangled noises rasping from a throat suddenly grown dry as a desert, groping behind me until I found the door where it stood open. Then I turned and leaped out into the street, bounding and floating in a mindless panic-flight over the ancient cobbles, down Sea Lane to Front Street and the promenade, leaping like a madman across the tumbled debris of the old sea wall, knowing the biting agony of my twisted ankle and caring not a bit, until I felt the soft sand of the beach beneath my flying feet and turned them homeward.

Homeward, yes, for there was nowhere else to run. How many more of the villagers were part of the Deep One plot to establish themselves in England? I had no way of knowing. And in any case, no matter whom I called on for help, once the ‘constable’ caught up with me he would soon put an end to any ‘wild claims’ I might make. And so I could only run.

Nor did I stop until I reached the foot of the steps where they zig-zagged up the cliff face, and only then because I feared that if I did not stop I must surely fall dead from my exertions. But even there, so close to home, still I was full of fear.

Gone now the man of action who had escaped in such spectacular fashion from Sam Hadley’s taxi. Now I was in the grip of terror! Terror whispered in a thin wind that sprang up unbidden off the sea, gloomed from the shadows at the foot of the cliffs, stared blindly down from the pale face of the old moon.

Hopping where I could and trailing my injured foot, I somehow managed to climb the precipitous stairs and make my way to my lonely refuge. There I found my door key in its secret place and let myself in. There was evidence that the house had been visited, and I knew that the Deep Ones

would not have found too much difficulty in gaining entry, but a quick search of the premises satisfied me that they were not there now. Then I went straight to the telephone … a futile hope.

The line must have been down. No, I was fooling myself; the line had been deliberately cut against just such an eventuality as my return to the house.

Now I looked about to see how best I might fortify the house, for I knew that it wouldn't be long before they came for me. Using hammer and nails and a stack of stout shelving from the garage, I set about systematically to barricade the ground—floor doors and windows. I worked all through what remained of the night, and at last, as dawn came up over the horizon, the task was completed to my satisfaction. Then, incapable of keeping my eyes open a second longer, I collapsed on my bed. My exhaustion was such that for once, mercifully, there were neither dreams nor nightmares; or, if there were, I could not remember them …

Something brought me awake.

I awoke with the sort of shock that often follows a heavy drinking bout —of which I had had my share after the death of my wife—when there is a feeling of dislocation and discontinuity: the sensation of having been stopped, like a timepiece, and then restarted. Then I recognized my own room, saw that I was still in my clothes (and noted how unkempt and full of sand they were), and the rest of it came back to me as a hideous kaleidoscope of memories.

But what had awakened me?

I sprang from my bed, then reeled drunkenly and almost fell as the searing pain from my now badly swollen ankle washed over me. But I knew that there was much more than a mere sprain wrong with me—indeed, my entire metabolism was now out of order. My brain seemed to burn, my eyes were on fire, every muscle of my body ached as if shredded, and I felt completely dehydrated. I stumbled into my study, starting spastically as the telephone jangled for a second time.

The telephone? Perhaps the line had been down after all, and was now repaired. I snatched the handset from its cradle and said, “Yes? John Vollister here. Who’s calling?”

The shock of hearing my own voice, so guttural, altered, debased, almost made me drop the telephone. The change must be speeding up in me … and

I had wasted so much time. Sunlight flooded my study, and the absence of shadows outside the balcony window told me that it must be around noon.

“John, is that you?” came Sarah's voice over the wire, a much deeper, coarser voice than I was used to. And, a moment later, there came a sound which at first I could not quite make out. Crying? She was crying! “John, John—why did you do it? Everything was going so well, for both of us, and now—”

“Why did *I* do it?” I croaked, cutting her off, feeling rage rising in me at the thought of her treachery. “Me? I did something? Why in hell did you do it, Sarah? You knew what they were doing to me, yet you lied to me all along, right from the start. ‘Ambassador to the Deep Ones’, you said—but you didn't tell me that my duties would include this!”

“The change?” she sobbed. “Is that what you mean? But that might have happened to you, anyway, John.”

“And it might not!” I shouted.

“But what if it had? What would you have done then, as a … a half-thing, like Sargent? Why, a man like you—you’d have gone mad!”

“Oh? Would I?” I asked through grinding teeth, wishing I had her there with me, my hands about her throat and not merely the neck of this plastic, impersonal thing that spoke to me now. “I'd be like Sargent, would I? Oh, yes, I remember. He told me I was one of the lucky ones—and I didn’t understand what he meant. Lucky—my God!”

“Listen, John,” her voice was calmer. “It’s not too late for you to square things, even now. There will be a penance, of course, but—”

I listened no further, but slammed the phone down into its cradle, cutting her off. I wondered if they had found Hadley’s burned-out car yet; and, of course, they were totally ignorant of the fact that I had not taken the full course of the metamorphosis treatment. “Not too late,” indeed. Little she knew of it! And yet still I dared hope that the … damage … I had suffered might be repaired.

Then, uselessly, I began soundly to curse the Deep Ones and all they stood for. Where had they been, I wondered, when the change began to affect my father? For surely there must have been far more of their tainted blood in him than there was in me.

It all made sense now—all of the genealogical anomalies in my recent family history, which had always puzzled me—the record of strange deteriorations, suicide, and sudden madness. And perhaps it was that very

record which had led them to seek me out in the first place. Poor Belton had said they were recruiting doctors, and through them it was doubtless easy to acquire access to records. It could only have been recently, after all, that they had really started to organize their activities again following the big operation against them in Innsmouth in 1928.

Yes, and that was where it had all started for me, too: in New England …

It had been following a trip to America to visit a distant cousin that my grandmother, a young woman, had “gone into seclusion”. She was still unwed when my father was born at the home, and she died giving him life. This was as much as I had ever known about her, told to me by my mother before her own decline. As for my father: I never knew him. He killed himself when I was a very small child: and that, too, had been following a brief period of severe mental and physical deterioration: “the change”, of course. No wonder my poor mother, who had never been strong, had followed him in the space of so few years to the grave. She must have seen the horrible thing come over him.

But, damn it all, the blood of the Deep Ones had not been strong in me! I would have lived out my life in total ignorance of them but for their meddling. And now, here I was, with the morbid seeds they had awakened in me blossoming into hideous life, trapped like a rat in my own home. Trapped here, yes, for when I went out on to my balcony I could see them where they waited for me: the big American car along the track that led to the coast road, the little knot of ‘picnickers’ along the clifftop, the silent watcher who waited at the top of the stairs that wound down to the beach.

To venture outside now would be to give myself into their hands, when they would surely kill me rather than let me carry my story to the authorities. And yet somehow I must make the world aware of what was happening. And so my plan took shape and I started work on this manuscript, work which has been continually interrupted but which, nevertheless, I have now almost managed to complete. A few pages more, and … But that is to jump ahead of myself.

Scribbling desperately all through the afternoon, I first paused at around 6 p.m. to take a drink and a bite of food, and to tend to my ankle, which was now causing me constant pain and crippling my every movement. I did not want night to descend and find me completely immobilized.

It was then, as I searched for bandages for my sprained ankle, that I heard raised, angry voices from beneath my balcony windows. I had

deliberately left the windows ajar in the forlorn hope that someone—some completely human person—might pass my way. Since my house is so out of the way, this was highly unlikely, but there was always a chance, however remote. Now it seemed that good fortune was with me. The male voice I heard was that of my newspaper delivery boy, Graham Lane, and I could only assume that the other voice, female, belonged to his fiancee.

I crept out on to the balcony, keeping well down and out of sight of who or whatever might be watching the house, and raised my head until I could look down. There stood Graham, his shoulders drooping, abjectly watching the haughtily retreating figure of a young woman who hurried back along the lane towards the main road. Twice he called after her, and twice her head lifted a little higher as she stalked jauntily off. Patently they had been out walking, there had been an argument—a lover's tiff—and now she was going off on her own.

"Graham!" I called down. And then, quickly, as he began to turn his head upward: "No, don't look up. It's me, Mr. Vollister. Now listen! Don't turn around. Just stand there, looking after your young lady. I'm being watched, Graham, and I need help. No! For God's sake, *don't look round!* Nod your head, just a little, if you can hear and understand. Good! Now listen:

"I'm in bad trouble, Graham, and it's government business. You see those people up the path there? In the big American car? Those are some of them. There's also a bunch of picnickers on the clifftop—except they're not picnickers. And there's a man at the top of the steps. Don't speak to anyone if you can possibly avoid it. There may well be others. Can you hear me?"

Again the slight nod of his head.

"Good! Now, Graham, there's a hundred pounds in this for you if you can get my message out. Use the public telephone in the village, or maybe the phone in your father's shop. Get the police, Graham, but whatever you do, *don't go to* the *police in Seaham!* I can't explain now, but the new constable's not to be trusted. OK?"

Once again the nod. And his whisper, floating up to me: "Did you say a hundred pounds, Mr. Vollister?"

"Two hundred," I answered, "if you can pull it off. Make it as dramatic as you like. Counterfeiters, a drug ring—whatever you like. Only get the police here. As many as possible, and as quickly as you can."

"But what is it?" he whispered. "What's going on?"

I groped desperately in my mind for an answer he would be able to accept, finally saying: “Atom spies—sabotage—the new power station at Gar Fell. But don’t tell the police that. Tell them it’s kidnapping or something. A drug ring would probably do the trick. You’d better get going now before they suspect. Call out after your girl, then run after her.”

He moved to obey as I whispered one last instruction. “Tell no one else. And remember: don’t go to the police in Seaham! Good luck, Graham. You’re my one chance …” Then he was gone, down the lane, around a bend, disappearing in trees and hedgerows. Without more ado, I crept back into my study, moved away from the windows, and stood up. So far, so good. Providing the lad followed my instructions, I should be safely out of this in the space of a few hours. Perhaps by nightfall. Then—a doctor. The best doctors in the land. What drugs had done to me, perhaps other drugs might reverse. And, by God, wouldn't I have a story to tell when these vile creatures from the sea were brought to book? Indeed I would …

On the other hand … Suddenly it occurred to me that I might well have placed young Graham Lane in the most terrible danger. What if something should go wrong with my plan? But what could go wrong? Nothing, as long as he followed my instructions …

With all of these jumbled thoughts and worries revolving in my head, I removed my clothes to shower before tending to my ankle. It was then, in the clear light of day, that I noticed for the first time the alterations in my feet: the tough webbing of skin that now extended half-way down the length of my toes. This led me to an immediate examination of my hands, which in turn proved to be growing a webbing of toughly elastic skin between the fingers. The bathroom mirror, which until now I had avoided, showed all too clearly how quickly my metamorphosis was taking place: the ichthyic coarsening of the pores of my skin, the toughening of my now near-functional gills, my hideously enlarged eyes, and my rapidly receding hairline.

The sight of these monstrous changes and the knowledge of how they had been wrought in me brought on a seething rage that lasted until I took my shower. And only then did I realize the importance of water to my new state of being, for of course I was rapidly becoming one with the amphibia, beginning to share their traits and characteristics, and while certainly I might live on dry land, I now found the sheer joy of bathing almost unbearable! The water took away all my aches and pains, eased the

constriction of my throat, softened my gills, and soaked into my skin, making it pliable and slick to the touch.

My God! At last the horrible implications of my position—my *condition*—drove stunningly home, particularly the inescapable fact that I was no longer completely human. I had known it for some time, of course, ever since discovering myself to be gilled in the cramped confines of the tank, but only now did the real horror of my position truly dawn on me. Even the strongest of men might weep in my predicament, and I am not ashamed to state that I, too, wept.

Afterwards, I sat for a while, and gradually my mood of utter hopelessness began to lift. I could still strike back—must strike back—before this thing went any further. And though I had already started to lose faith in my plan of escape (that rescue I had arranged through Graham Lane), still, even in the event that the worst should happen, I could at least leave a documentary warning behind me when finally *they* came for me.

For certainly to rely solely upon my secret messenger would be a great mistake. Graham might be stopped, might not even begin to carry out my instructions. What if he had reconsidered, perhaps suspecting himself to be the would-be victim of some sort of practical joke? In his place I myself would be extremely wary, cautious, suspicious. And what if he in some way attempted to verify the facts of what I had told him? Just suppose he completely ignored my warning and went straight to the police station in Seaham? The short hairs at the back of my neck stood up straight at the thought of *that*, then slowly subsided as I began to plot along the lines of Graham's possible failure to make my plight known to the authorities.

For if indeed anything should go disastrously wrong, still I could not simply let the Deep Ones win so easily. No, I must leave evidence against them, something which would be found after my passing, a clear indictment of their activities. And so it was that as the light began to fail and evening crept in I donned my dressing-gown and returned to working on my manuscript, writing as quickly as possible. It was imperative that the tale be told fully, that as much light as possible be shed upon the hellish activities of these invaders from the deep.

Twice when I paused to rest my eyes, I thought to try the telephone, but on both occasions, as soon as I picked up the handset, guttural enquiries made it obvious that I might only speak to the Deep Ones. Thus I learned to leave the telephone alone. Then, as evening deepened …

IX: The Unending Nightmare

A sound outside brought me bolt upright from where I had slumped at my desk. I must have dozed off, for my study was now shadowed and gloomy, and the roll of the sea had grown quiet with the hush of encroaching night. Quietly I went out on to my balcony. Figures, looking human enough in the dusk, were down below me in the shadow of the house. If only I had a rifle … whatever they were up to, I would soon put an end to it. I had no weapon, however, so I went back inside to find my flashlight. Its batteries were weak, but still it should give some light.

Armed with the flashlight, once more I crept out on to the balcony. There, aiming the light downward, I switched on its beam. For a moment, the uncertain shaft of light trapped a pair of startled round-eyed faces that stared up at me, then the furtive figures melted into shadows and moved away around the corner of the house. As they went, I heard a jingling of keys. Well, they'd have little luck in that direction; in addition to being boarded up, my doors were bolted on the inside. But at least this attempted intrusion illustrated the determination of the Deep Ones to get in at me, and I was glad I had taken the precaution of securely barricading the house.

Then, as I was about to return yet again from the balcony to my study, I heard my name softly called from below: "John—John Vollister—why don't you give in, John Vollister? You can't win, you know."

Though I had never heard this particular voice before, by its uneven texture I knew its owner for a Deep One. Flashing the beam of light into the shadows of trees that bordered the path to the cliffs, I dimly illuminated a small group of figures. There were four of them, one of whom was—Graham Lane!

His hands were bound behind him and his face seemed to be bloodied. A dark gag (dark with blood, I suspected) filled his mouth, and his hair was awry. His jacket was badly torn, and he stumbled weakly between the three Deep Ones where they kept him in their midst. How he had fallen into their hands I could not say, but certainly he had been badly beaten.

One of the three Deep Ones turned his face directly into the beam of my flashlight and, in that same previously unknown voice, said: "You should come out now, John Vollister. Already you have incurred grave penalties—and there will be penances in plenty—but nothing you can't endure. If you continue to be awkward, however …" The figure shrugged.

“And what do you intend doing with … with him?” I finally, hoarsely answered, shining my beam on Graham where he staggered between them. “He’s of no use to you, and he’s certainly no threat. Why don’t you let him go?”

A chuckle, deep and evil, sounded in the night. “Come now, John. We all know better than that, don’t we? Now listen, it's high time we came to an understanding. You’re fairly important to us, and that's why we’ve been lenient with you—so far. There will be penalties, however, as I’ve said, and the longer you defy us the worse it will be for you. Indeed, it’s not entirely impossible that you might yet incur the ultimate penalty … which is why we’ve brought along young Mr. Lane, here. After all, we can’t allow him simply to sabotage our programme, now can we? So we’ve decided to make an example of him …” The voice faded into a hideously suggestive silence.

“What do you mean?” I croaked. “Who the hell are you, to threaten and __”

“Be quiet!” the voice hissed, its feigned affability disappearing in a moment. “Be quiet—*and watch!*”

The three Deep Ones stepped away from their stumbling captive and left him isolated on the path. My light faltered where it fell upon the bound, beaten youth, then strengthened momentarily as an overwhelming stench of seaweed and foulness welled up from the darkness. I nearly dropped the flashlight then, as I recognized that deep ocean smell. It was the monstrous stench of a shoggoth—and I immediately guessed what the “ultimate penalty” would be!

Caught in the trembling beam of light, Graham Lane also smelled that fatal fetor and stumblingly turned towards its source. Swelling out of the shadows came a greater blackness glinting with myriad eyes, all of them fixed upon its victim as the shoggoth flowed and squelched with sea—squirt sounds along the path towards him. At first frozen to the spot, finally Graham turned to flee. He stumbled, fell, somehow struggled to his feet … and the thing was upon him!

Transfixed with horror, clutching at the balcony to maintain my balance, I could only watch. God help me, I *could not* turn away as the thing happened!

Graham’s form, stumbling down the old path, hands tied behind him, had just started to topple forward into a second fall as the shoggoth enveloped him. One moment he was there—and in the next there was only

the pulsing, blackly glistening distorted shape of the monstrosity from the sea. Gagged, he had not even been able to scream as the thing took him …

And now there came that subdued roar I remembered so well—the firing of the shoggoth's internal engines—and the opening of its vile exhaust orifice, and then … then.

That fine, black jet of stinking mist that shot upward high into the air—a spray of human debris—the atomized essence of Graham Lane!

Finally, sufficient strength and movement returned to my nerveless fingers to enable me to switch off the beam from my flashlight, and then for a long while I tottered in dumb oblivion high above the scene of Graham's awful murder. Slowly, very slowly, my senses returned to me, by which time all was silent and the shoggoth stench had disappeared. The whole episode had been like a nightmare which was now ended, except that I knew it was no nightmare.

Staggering back inside and locking the windows, I felt a weird and utterly unnatural excitement rising in me: the crazy urge to tear down my sturdily erected defences, throw back the bolts, and rush outside to do battle with those who sought me. Rapidly, the wildest of schemes occurred to my fevered brain, insane urges that sent me raging through the house until, at the last, I recognized the source of this new threat and began to combat it.

This was surely a manifestation of my emerging madness, no doubt brought on by Graham Lane's hideous death, proof that my drug-damaged psyche was rapidly deteriorating. In just such a fury I had crushed the life out of Semple; and, when escaping from the place on the beach, I had also felt a lunatic urge to swim out to sea and give myself into the hands of the eternal tides. A similar madness had crept over me when I had spoken to Sarah on the telephone, which had made me lust after her life in a murderous fury. In short, the mad emotions I felt within me were a direct result of my metamorphosis—and of my failure to take the pills which alone might have saved my sanity.

When the truth dawned on me, I went straight to the bathroom and doused my throbbing head. And a few minutes later I was myself again. Then, putting to the back of my mind as best I might the death of the youth who had tried to help me, I returned to this, my manuscript, and scribbled frantically until well after midnight.

It was then, just as I was beginning to nod once more over my work, that I heard a peculiar sound issuing from somewhere below. My ears were, of course, attuned to the house, to each familiar creak of settling timbers and every quiet gurgle of the plumbing, so that any extraneous sound was immediately apparent to me. Quickly, I went down into the darkness of the ground floor, silently inspecting all my fortifications and listening for any repetition of the sound. I was in the library, checking my interior work on its tall, narrow-framed windows, when I was shocked into immobility by a recurrence of the sound, this time from close at hand. Someone was working on one of the windows beyond the barricade with a glass-cutter!

Silently I made my way to the kitchen, found a meat cleaver, and returned to the library. Knowing the house intimately, I had not once resorted to the use of lights. Only the light in my study continued to burn, and doubtless my adversaries believed me to be up there right now, fast asleep. Well, they were in for an unpleasant surprise. I seated myself, placed the cleaver in my lap, and waited.

The luminous dial of the library clock showed the hour to be just after 1 a.m. when the first board was sufficiently loose to be carefully removed out into the night. I stood up then and moved to one side, careful to keep out of sight as a light was flashed into the library from the darkness outside. A breeze was coming off the sea, and with it a powerful smell of deep ocean that was far from right. There were Deep Ones out there, for a certainty, and to prove the matter beyond dispute there came into view the hand that galvanized me into action. It was mottled and webbed, that hand, with a webbing far more pronounced than my own meagre growth, so that I knew its owner to be a fully developed Deep One.

In the hour or so that I had sat there in silence, the rage within me had once again reached terrifying proportions, so that I was no longer wholly in control of myself when I made my move. The hand had just commenced to explore the edge of the gap formed by the missing board, was groping and pushing here and there, when I chopped at the fingers with my cleaver. Immediately, there came an agonized howl of pain as the hand was withdrawn—but three fingers and the tip of the thumb stayed inside the house with me!

Then, laughing demoniacally and almost dancing with crazed glee, I tossed the grisly digits out after their owner before taking up an even stouter board and nailing it into place. This time I used long spikes of nails which

nothing less than a large hammer would be able to dislodge. I had no fear that the Deep Ones would use a shoggoth's great strength to break in: that would have caused a great deal of damage which might not be too easy to explain away should anyone stumble upon the house in the near future, before repairs could be effected.

Finished at last with the work on my breached barricade, I put on the lights and spent a further hour nailing up more boards in the other lower-level rooms. Whatever else happened, I didn't intend the Deep Ones to take me until my work on my manuscript was done.

At some time during these frantic physical exertions of mine, the madness went out of me, so that as I finished I discovered myself sane once more and weary from exhaustion. But finally, satisfied at last that the house was once again as secure as I could make it, I left the ground floor lights on and returned silently to my study. Let them believe that I was still downstairs; perhaps it would keep them away from the house.

And so I spent the rest of the night writing—and often as not nodding—at my desk, until the early morning sun crept into my study to tell me that I had survived to face another day. I threw some water on my face to freshen up, then went out on to the balcony. They were still there: the big car, the picnickers, the watcher at the top of the steps. But none of them was near the house. That suited my purposes perfectly, and I made a quick breakfast before preparing to take a shower.

Then it was that I discovered a further development of the siege, one which would have very serious consequences for me. It was simply this: that the water from the shower was flowing with much less than its usual force.

I shut the water off at once, put on my dressing-gown, and went up into the attic. It was as I had feared: the Deep Ones had somehow contrived to shut off my water supply; no water was reaching the house from the outside. How long, then, before they also interfered with the electricity supply? My answer came at midday when I tried to make coffee. The game was over; now they were in earnest. And yet … if I could only make it through one more night, I knew I could finish my work. And indeed that work had now become an obsession with me, so that as the afternoon grew towards evening I worked ever faster.

I could not possibly hope to keep this up without sleep, however, and I found myself snatching the old half hour now and then, always jerking into

wakefulness at the slightest sound. Then I would get up from my desk, go to the bathroom, and thoroughly douse my face and gills, always carefully turning off my rapidly diminishing water supply when I was finished.

At about 6 p.m., I was startled from fitful sleep by the persistent ringing of my telephone. Not only that, but my study light was on. For some reason, the Deep Ones had temporarily restored my power—but not, I later discovered, my water. Before answering the phone, I had sufficient wit to dash downstairs and switch on my electric kettle. It had dawned on me that when the call was finished it might also signal the end of my electricity. So, if I could only keep the caller busy on the wire for a few minutes, I should have some coffee!

It was Sarah on the telephone, and her voice was now almost unrecognizable: “John listen—and please don’t put the phone down—you must listen to me. The Deep Ones are very angry, John, and unless you’ll see sense they intend to take you by force. Surely you must know by now that you can’t win?”

“I can try,” I answered.

“John, don’t be a fool! There’s nothing left for you now among ordinary men. You’re finished with all that. Now it's you and I—both of us together—and the Deep Ones forever!”

“I'll kill myself first,” I told her, fighting back the rage that was rapidly building in me.

“But why? We’ll have each other, John, and even now it’s not too late for—”

“Sarah,” I cut her off, forcing myself to maintain a semblance of sanity, “it is too late. Much too late. I didn’t take the pills.”

There was a long pause, then: “Pills?” Her voice was hushed, a cracked whisper. “What pills? Not the—”

“Yes, *those* pills—the ones that stop your poor damned victims from going mad. The ones that help them keep their mental equilibrium as the change accelerates. Semple told me all about them—but too late. I didn’t take them.”

“John—I’ll come to you,” she said, her altered voice full of desperation. “I'll come!”

“Not now, Sarah,” I told her. “Don’t come tonight. Not in the dark—not with the lights out—with the stench of the Deep Ones on you! If you do, I'll kill you! I’ll kill every damn one of you who puts his damn nose anywhere

near me! Do you hear? Do you *hear?*" And I slammed the handset back into its cradle. Damn every last one of the stinking, hell-spawned devils!

I went stumblingly to the bathroom, my rage seething within me, caught my reflection in the mirror as I splashed my face with water—then ripped the mirror from the wall! And that was the signal for me to go on a rampage of destruction right through the house. I overturned chairs and tables, brought down shelves of cut crystal which had taken me years to collect, ripped pictures from walls, and tore down curtains until at last, as the mental fever began to burn itself out (at least for the moment), I found myself in the kitchen. The water in the kettle was still hot. Shaking like a leaf in a gale, dizzy and weak from my uncontrollable excesses, I made coffee and shakily carried the jug and a cup back upstairs to my study.

Then, as dusk began to settle in and the light started to grow dim, I remembered a box of candles long ago pushed to the back of a drawer in the kitchen. I had bought them in the village months ago when a fault had developed in the house's wiring. I went back downstairs and found them, eight of them, lighting two and placing them strategically in my study to give a maximum of light. At the same time, I primed and brought up a blowtorch I'd once used in paint—stripping; it might come in useful, if only as another source of light.

Having made what preparations I could before the onset of night, I decided to trust to luck and snatch an hour's sleep. I set the alarm clock and stretched out on my bed, where exhaustion soon overtook me …

Something woke me from a nightmare of sinking endlessly into black waters. Sweating profusely, remembering what had gone before, I started up and stared at the luminous dial of the alarm clock. 11.35? What had happened? I couldn't believe my eyes!

Snatching up the clock, I shook it angrily before noting that the alarm mechanism had jammed. Obviously, the fault was mine: I had over wound the thing! I tossed it down and went through to my study where one of the candles still guttered in its saucer. The tiny wick was floating in a little pool of wax. Immediately, I lit another candle, then sat down nervously to wait for a recurrence of whatever it was that had awakened me.

I didn't have long to wait.

No sooner was I seated than there came fumbling sounds from outside, small furtive noises that only just reached me from the other side of the

house. I went to the bathroom, which is on that side, and carefully, quietly opened the window a few inches. An almost overpowering odour at once wafted up from below, driving me back from the window in horror and disgust! There must be an entire gang of Deep Ones out there to create a stench like that—but what were they up to?

I closed the window, took up my cleaver, and made my way silently downstairs to the kitchen. A side door led from the kitchen into the garage, and by my judgement that was where the Deep Ones had gathered. But what could they be doing? The garage had no windows, and its exterior door was of stout metal. Surely they would not be looking there for a way in?

I opened the door to the garage—and literally staggered in the hideous rush of vile gasses that immediately poured out to fill the kitchen! Although the batteries of my flashlight were almost exhausted, still I had thought to bring it with me. Holding my nose against the stench, I put down my cleaver, took the flashlight from the pocket of my dressing-gown, and flashed it briefly about the untidy interior of the disused room. It was exactly as I had last seen it, and—

No, not exactly the same, for there was a sound: a trickling as of some oily liquid. That monstrous stench—the trickling sound—and a *motion!* I had seen something move as I flashed my dim beam across the room. Holding the flashlight tightly, trembling so badly that I could barely control my movements, slowly I swung the beam back to the wide metal door. A slow, thickly glutinous trickle of dark—*substance*—was entering through the keyhole in the door and forming a small pool on the concrete floor.

Silently stepping over old boxes and cartons and skirting a pile of unused boards, I approached the door and knelt to watch this filthy stuff filter into the garage. It was shiny black and full of the same evil smell which so offended me; indeed, it was the source of that smell. Was it inflammable, I wondered? Did the Deep Ones intend to burn me out? I hadn’t thought they would dare anything so extreme. Any subsequent investigation would surely lead to—

A hideous suspicion had entered my mind, and before I could consciously stop myself I had put out a finger to dab it at the edge of the small puddle of goo. It was warm, sticky, and it clung to my finger as if … alive!

I snatched my finger back, saw that the outer layers of skin had been removed from it—dissolved away—and, mouth agape, turning my eyes once more to the pool of noxious matter, I saw … saw that it was forming a little hump, a gelatinous stalagmite that grew up inches from the floor even as I watched, and formed—formed—an eye!

Great God in heaven, it was a shoggoth they had out there, one of their protomorphic "machines"! And it was pouring itself into my garage like pus from some cosmic sore!

For a moment the vile trickling paused as that single eye gazed at me, then the loathsome orb melted back into its elementary slime and the flow continued at a redoubled rate. I fled upstairs, uncaring now of any noise I might make, back to my lighted study where I cast about for a way to drive the shoggoth out into the night.

Almost at once my eyes lighted upon the primed blowtorch. Would that work, I wondered? God!—it must work! If there was one thing that the horror in the garage could not stand against, surely that thing would be heat. Oh, I knew well enough that these monsters could generate tremendous heat *within* themselves (they would need that facility, for it's an extremely cold world on the bed of the ocean), but this small pool, this tendril of living matter—it must surely be vulnerable.

I rushed back downstairs, through the kitchen and into the garage, crossing to the door and kneeling beside the now *rippling* and lumpy pool of loathsomeness. Quickly I struck a match to the blowtorch and pumped the flame to a roaring lance of invisible heat. Faster still the goo poured in, and more purposeful the agitation in the ever—widening pool. Two eyes formed this time, rearing up to peer at me—just as I turned the blowtorch on them!

Instantly a mephitic cloud of steam rose up from the pool, obscuring everything as I covered my nose and mouth with one hand while directing the blowtorch with the other. Suddenly I felt about my legs the whipping lash of something that burned like acid, and through a momentary gap in the shrivelling pool of shoggoth tissue I saw writhing pseudopods of frenziedly thrashing slime. Then, accompanied by an utterly unearthly shriek of agony from beyond the door—a sound which neither human nor any animal throat, nor any mechanical device known to man, might make—the remaining thread of tissue was withdrawn through the keyhole and I was left playing the blowtorch on an area of stained, scorched cement.

Once more I had won, and in so doing had given myself the time necessary for the completion of my manuscript. I went back upstairs and splashed myself all over with life-giving water; then, as soon as my nerves were sufficiently calmed, I returned to my desk and to this, my work, which was then well over three-quarters completed …

That was last night, almost twenty-four hours ago, and it was the last attempt of the Deep Ones to drive me from my home. In any case, they had probably known that I could not hold out much longer. My guess is that they were simply attempting to "save me from myself", from my threat to commit suicide. I had never intended to do so in the first place, but they didn't know that.

This morning, as the sun came up, I tried to doze a little, only to discover that my nightmares were now so monstrous that sleep was no longer possible. And later, Sarah phoned to tell me that she would come at noon.

She came, bringing with her the conch that had first introduced me to the horror. She brought both the shell and the answers, at last, to those few remaining questions which still baffled me; answers that now fit together to complete the puzzle.

I did not kill her as I had threatened, but instead put away my manuscript, took down the boards that barred her entry, and made her as welcome as I could. The madness was off me, and only a great weariness remained. It was the weariness of defeat, the knowledge that I could not possibly win the whole game, and that my only hope for personal survival lay with the Deep Ones.

Yes, she brought me my conch, a shell similar to the type used by the *adaro* of the Solomon Islands to call to their land-born brothers and lure them down to the sea. And indeed it was that conch which had first lured me, whose colours and contours had struck hidden chords of that ancestral memory which flows in the blood and lingers in the minds of all Deep Ones. That shell, and with it those dreams from R'lyeh with which I had been so singularly honoured, had been the triggers to quicken the seeds within me. The rest of it should have been a slow but certain process of indoctrination and preparation.

Sarah was to have helped, was the sweet worm with which they had baited their tender hook, and certainly I had taken the bait. Then, just as things were going exactly as they had planned, I had wrecked the entire scheme by returning to the place on the beach when they were not

expecting me. The only course left open to them then had been to take me forcibly and process my metamorphosis as quickly as possible.

These things I already knew, but there were others I still did not understand. Sarah told me about them. For instance, there was her "father". He was not her father at all, but her *four-times-great-grandfather!* One of the benefits of being a Deep One is extreme longevity. And I, too, could be "proud" of my genealogy, for my unknown grandfather had been an Innsmouth Marsh of the original Marsh line, which was one of the two reasons why I had been tracked down and singled out for rehabilitation?

As for the other reason: Belton had been right. I was a marine biologist, and there was much I could teach the Deep Ones—and learn from them—there in the great deeps. There were problems to be overcome, though, for science in a submarine environment is no simple matter.

All of these things Sarah told me, and certain others, but when I felt the madness returning, I made her go. Then I boarded up the door again before taking a shower in the last of my water to cool and ease pains both mental and physical. As to what had set the rage burning in me once more—that vicious boiling of my blood and the hideous lusts it engenders—I think it was Sarah's face, no longer a wholly human face, and yet in no way as repulsive as I had thought I might find it. It was to me, with its bulging eyes and thickening lips, as a mirror of my own face, which no longer offends me but looks almost—natural? And, indeed, that was the paradox that sparked the rage in me … but only for a little while.

Since making her leave me, I have spent most of my time at my desk, tidying up this work as best I might, and at last I have brought it to a close. Now, as midnight approaches, there are strange shadows on the silver sands, and some of them tower and nod in an entirely monstrous fashion. For this is the hour appointed, when I swore to deliver to the Deep Ones my final word—which is that I shall join them there in the Deeps!

Except that—

Whoever you are, reading this, be certain of one thing: that even though I go to join them, still I loathe and detest them! But life is dear to me—even as a changeling, life is dear—and all the untold wonders of the oceans await me …

Yet still I say to you *I will be avenged!* This I swear!

Whoever you are, and whenever you discover this manuscript locked in its metal box, do not delay, but ensure that it meets the eyes of the proper

authorities immediately! *The continuity of your very world depends upon it!*

And whosoever doubts my word, only let him look beneath the waters, let him only walk along the shores of this world and listen to the songs of the sea. For in the end, if ever the Deep Ones are to be rooted out and destroyed, it must be you and not I who brings about that destruction. I cannot help you, for I can no longer help myself. Although I have sworn vengeance, such vengeance can strike only through you now.

For the madness is on me and the voice of the storm calls to me. I hear it raging from the mouth of my conch, see it foaming in the whitecaps conjured in the contours of its whorl! And I must go where the octopus stares with cat's eyes and the squid silently starts on jets of ink, where the timeless tides tell stories of primal ocean, and coral labyrinths thrill to siren songs from abyssal caverns.

Ia-R'lyeh!

I am one with all the hosts of Dagon and Mother Hydra—one with the Deep Ones in the worship of the Great Father Kraken—and with them I shall make my home in vasty vaults of ocean …

Personal—by hand—for the attention of:
William P. Marsh, Esq.
c/o The Gilman Hotel
Innsmouth, Mass.
July 28

Venerable Brother—

Most humble greetings from England, where all proceeds according to plan—except for that of which you were previously apprised. Ahu-Y'hloa grows apace, and already her columns take on a certain lustre—but more of that, and of the gains we have made and continue to make in Seaham at a later date.

With regard to the manuscript which accompanies this:

It was discovered hidden beneath some loose floorboards in a ground-floor room of what was once your grandson's house. We have, of course, acquired the place in the furtherance of our plans, and the discovery of the manuscript was quite by chance.

In reading it I am sure you will note that under the precipitate circumstances all of our actions were fully warranted, and that if anyone is

to blame for the outcome that one must surely be David Semple. As you are aware (and as the manuscript so graphically tells), he has already paid in full for his inefficiency.

As was your wish, no penance has been taken of your grandson, since it is deemed that by virtue of his own folly he has already paid enough. Despite his oath at the end of the manuscript, he no longer displays any hurtful tendencies towards us; at his best he is an avid student of The Lore.

Furthermore, he desires permission to undertake a pilgrimage—to R'lyeh! He wishes to enter that most sacred of doors and go down to the lower vaults, to the feet of dreaming Cthulhu Himself. Aye, for he has heard the call of Cthulhu in his dreams, wherefore we cannot deny him that most high audience.

The girl, Sarah, of my own flesh as you well know, would go with him on the journey. This will be an undertaking of several years' duration, during which they will visit and carry Cthulhu's word to many of the more remote settlements along the way. Of course, it is understood that she must first abide the time of her spawning. Since you have intimated your own desire that no further harm befall John Vollister, and since unfortunately he is no longer of any use for much else, the plan would seem a good one. His condition is quite irreversible, but the girl will be there to care for him when he is not himself…

Yrs. by the Sign of Ab-Hyth,
Ephraim Bishop

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